NF

ISSUE #68:
THE ABCs OF RPGs

PAPER MARIO:
THE THOUSAND-YEAR DOOR

SEA OF STARS

STAR OCEAN:
THE SECOND STORY R

YS X: NORDICS

BATEN KAITOS
I & II HD REMASTER

FINAL FANTASY
PIXEL REMASTERS

DETECTIVE PIKACHU
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AN INTERVIEW WITH
YU SUZUKI

SUPER MARIO BROS.
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POKÉMON
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VIOLET:
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OF AREA ZERO, PART 1:
THE TEAL MASK

DRAGON QUEST
MONSTERS:
THE DARK PRINCE

INFINITY STRASH:
DRAGON QUEST -
THE ADVENTURE OF DAI

NOVEMBER/
DECEMBER 2023

HAVE A FREE SAMPLE!

WE'RE CLOSING IN on the release of NF's first book, The Impact of Iwata, and I'm here to once again use this inner NF cover space to try to encourage you to grab a copy! (If you haven't already ordered one, of course! Thanks again to all of you who were Kickstarter backers or have since preordered through the BackerKit link shown below.)

One of the extra items created to support the book launch is our Set of 16 Art Print Postcards. The Impact of Iwata has 16 main chapters, and each one of them is kicked off by a gorgeous illustration featuring Mr. Iwata interacting with the game worlds he helped to create. The postcards bring that art out of the book to make it more easily displayable in your home – or, since they're actual, functional postcards, you could always choose to mail them to friends!

Kickstarter backers had a chance to snag the full set of 16 as part of the Collector's Edition pledge tier, and that tier is still available through the BackerKit preorder/"late pledge" site. You could also order the postcards as a separate add-on! And to encourage all of our magazine readers to consider doing that, we've included one randomly selected postcard out of the full set of 16 in the mailing bag alongside print copies of this NF issue. Maybe you got one of the three seen below? Maybe you got one featuring art that hasn't previously been revealed! Whatever image fate selected for you, I hope you enjoy it – and consider completing the full set if you haven't already! **– LUCAS**

Preorders will only be available until the book begins to ship starting this December!

TheImpactOfIwata.BackerKit.com/hosted_preorders

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THE ABCs OF RPGs

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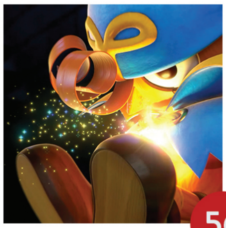
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ON THE COVER

Now we certainly could have chosen to put Mallow and Geno on the front cover of any of our previous issues, if we really wanted to. But how amazing is it to actually have a timely reason to do so?! Super Mario RPG, beloved by a whole generation of '90s gamers, is making a full-fledged comeback! It's delightful to see the revival of this fan-favorite game and its cult classic characters. And it's great to see regular faces Bowser, Peach and Mario looking squished and cute! Somebody's wish on a star got granted.

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NOVEMBER/ DECEMBER 2023

INBOX

THE PATIENCE OF ST. PATRICK

I think I'd credit Final Fantasy III for really solidifying my love of RPGs.

The year was 1994. Or maybe early '95? It wasn't a totally brand-new release when I first played it, since I plucked it out of a collection of dozens of SNES cartridges that had been assembled by my friend Patrick.

I'd been invited over to Patrick's place to play his many video games, and I happily accepted that invitation since Patrick's family was, well, rich. They lived in a huge house that was one of the nicest homes available in my humble hometown. He had tons of toys, multiple game systems and literal piles of different cartridges that he could choose from, along with an endless amount of screen time to play them as long as he liked, and a Mom who cheerfully served all sorts of snacks. It was wise to be friends with Patrick.

Patrick also had the patience of a saint, as when I selected Final Fantasy III from his SNES pile and turned it on, he quietly and contendedly just sat and watched me play through the first several hours of its single-player-only adventure, without complaint. I was in awe at what I was witnessing — and he was either too polite to suggest that we *maybe* play a two-player game so he could be included too, or else he was genuinely so happy to see *me* so happy that he didn't want to disrupt my first steps into a genuine masterpiece.

You might have your own story about your first time really connecting with a role-playing game — or else that moment might not have happened for you yet! In which case, it might be just over the horizon: Just one year after my first experience with FFIII (now more correctly known as FFVI), Nintendo partnered with some of the same creators who made it to present Super Mario RPG, an entry-level experience for gamers new to the genre. That same RPG 101 course is about to reopen enrollment thanks to the imminent arrival of a new Super Mario RPG remake for the Switch, so for this issue of NF, we're supporting that release by presenting an RPG-focused edition! After reading this issue, anyone should feel ready to play any role!

I'd been overjoyed by getting a free copy of Dragon Warrior a few years earlier, and I'd dabbled in the first Final Fantasy on NES a bit as well. But it really wasn't until that day at Patrick's place and playing FFIII that RPGs truly got a hold on me. (I quickly bought my own copy afterward.)

Thanks for your patience with me, old friend! It made a life-changing difference.

Lucas M Thomas

LUCAS M. THOMAS, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

ISSUE #67: SEPTEMBER/ OCTOBER 2023

Sonic and Mario clashed on the front cover of our Sidescrolling Showdown issue, but it was really just a friendly race — you can't go wrong with playing either of their 2D platforming titles! Since both games were released so close to the final deadline for this issue, we won't have our final reviews for either one until NF #69. But we did at least get started on our evaluation of Super Mario Wonder, so flip ahead to Page 72 to check that out!

Here in the Inbox, it's business as usual with Player's Poll responses to print. This time we asked if you have ever played the original Super Mario RPG before, and your thoughts about it. Then we wanted you to weigh in on whether Geno should make the cut for the next Smash roster (however far in the future that may be). Finally, we wanted you to pitch another '90s RPG to get a modern remake!

LETTERS

Howdy! I played Super Mario RPG when it came out on Wii's Virtual Console, and I really loved it! As a fan of both the Paper Mario and Mario & Luigi series, it was fun to experience the roots of those spin-off franchises.

As for Geno being in Smash, sure . . . but why not continue his adventures in a whole new Nintendo-exclusive series developed by Square Enix?

Finally, I would enjoy seeing Eiji Aonuma's directorial debut, Marvelous: Another Treasure Island, updated and released here. Perhaps in HD-2D? **— ANDREW NIXON**

I have never played the original Super Mario RPG game on the SNES before. However, I am interested in the remake — it looks so amazing! It'll be the first time I play the one game that started a whole line of Mario RPG games.

Considering how lots of people want to see Geno in Smash, I can see Geno being in Smash, playable or not.

If I wanted to see a '90s RPG get remade for the modern audience, it'd be Madou Monogatari from the Sega Saturn. It could be possible . . . if Sega, Compile Heart and D4 Enterprise agree on remaking it. Also, the Madou Monogatari games brought us the Puyo Puyo games! **— ELIJAH JOHN EUBANK (LOCAL SUPER MARIO AND NINTENDO FANATIC)**

Super Mario RPG was released a little before my first time with video games (my first Nintendo home console was the GameCube), so I don't have any experience with it. In fact, I actually don't know anything about the game except that everyone is always excited about Geno, haha! Coming from someone who is completely unaware of Geno's character, I think he would have made a great series rep in Smash. Either way, I've heard nothing but good things about SMRPG and I'm looking forward to the remake so that I can get a chance to play it for myself.

In terms of other '90s RPGs, I'd love to see Xenogears or Breath of Fire get the remake treatment.

Thanks for all of your hard work in keeping this magazine going! I never had a chance to subscribe to Nintendo Power back in the day, but now I can thanks to y'all! **— TORI**

Just wanted to pop my head out to say that a remake of EarthBound in the HD-2D style would be an absolute dream come true. Many of the remakes shown in the recent Mother Directs are looking great, such as EarthBound Dimensions and Mother Squared, but there's something irresistible about the thought of playing an official Switch remake of the Mother series in glorious HD-2D . . . **— DANIEL H.**

There are plenty of '90s RPGs that I didn't get a chance to play and would love to try. At the top of my list for a remaster is Xenogears. Everything I hear about that game is epic and legendary. It has one of the deepest stories ever for an RPG! . . . Or at least that's what I've been told. **— ANDREW**

I'm right there with you! Never have had a chance to play it. One day!

TIME TO DUST OFF THE SNES CLASSIC!

I have been playing the original Super Mario RPG recently on my Super NES Classic! It's such an awesome game! Technically, I've only gotten up to the Moleville Mines area, but still! One of my favorite parts so far is the first battle with Croco! I mean, a crocodile who talks like a gangster?!? CLASSIC!!!! Anyway, I'm excited for the remake. Better keep playing the original first, though! *[Looks toward living room.]* **— RAYMOND HINSHAW**

Thanks for the reminder, Raymond! The original SNES version of Super Mario RPG is not available to play through the Nintendo Switch Online lineup of retro games, which is where curious would-be players would've looked first to find it after the announcement of the remake. But it *was* one of the 21 titles selected for the SNES Classic that was released six years ago! Anyone who still has one of those kicking around should fire it up again!

I love Super Mario RPG! It was actually the game that kickstarted my obsession with games that came out before my time. I emailed Nintendo about it, and when it hit the Wii VC I was so pumped to play it on official hardware. It also was one of the first speedruns I ever saw.

As for Geno? I absolutely want him in Smash! He's so effortlessly cool, and his moveset would be great for Smash.

As for '90s RPGs? I have to go with the obvious answer: Chrono Trigger! It's one of my all-time favorites! **— DAVID O'BRIEN**

I have indeed played Mario RPG before, and I think it was one of the greatest RPGs and Mario games ever made. I've played it over and over again! From the unique storytelling to the very unique characters it is one of the best games of all time. It also helped pave the way for Paper Mario, one of my favorite series! I really can't wait for the remaster of this game — I almost cried when I saw it announced in the June Direct because I was so overjoyed that Nintendo didn't forget about the game I so love and enjoy playing. I can't wait to play the HD remaster of this game on Switch this November!

I would love to see Geno get into Smash since he is a fan-favorite character who has long been requested by many fans (including myself) to join the Super Smash Bros. roster. Geno could have many great moves. Like his Final Smash could be Geno Whirl! And of course, for the rest of his moves, they could add some of his best attacks from Mario RPG like the Star Gun, Geno Beam, Geno Flash and many more!

I would love to see a remake of an HD version of EarthBound. I know that's an answer most people will give, but I know most people would love to see this game in HD! I hope it comes true one day!

Thank you very much for doing his poll about Mario RPG! It's one of my favorite games of all time and I always love talking about it! **— EMORY S.**

My Dad was about my age when SMRPG came out. I have played Mario & Luigi: Bowser's Inside Story, where Mario and Bowser are indirect allies. I also played Mario & Luigi: Paper Jam, where you have a party of three. I think SMRPG is probably a mix between both of these games. I have high expectations for it!

Geno could have a wide variety of moves he could do. This complex moveset could rival many fighters! He could quickly become the favorite of many.

I have heard Chrono Trigger was a legend in the '90s. A remake or direct sequel could bring lots of approval. I hope this and many other '90s RPG remakes will happen! **— BLAKE CRANDELL**

I've been waiting 27 years to answer these questions! When asked, "What is your favorite video game?" I always answer, "Super Mario RPG: Legend of the Seven Stars." 10-year-old me had an absolute blast with this game when it came out. It broke the mold in many ways: It was Mario's (and my) first dip into the RPG genre; it was a legendary team-up between Nintendo and Square; Bowser was a playable "hero;" so many lovable characters were introduced . . . the list goes on.

Due to the circumstances surrounding this game, those lovable characters were subsequently forgotten. So, of course, I would love to see Geno blast his way to Smash, but it would also be cool if other SMRPG characters could join the ranks too.

The other impactful RPG from the '90s, for me, was Final Fantasy VI. I know we recently got a Pixel Remaster, but it would be an unstoppable force if it got that sweet Octopath Traveller treatment. Also, if you asked about a 2000s RPG, two words: Golden Sun. **— ANDREW GAULRAPP**

A big thanks to everyone who sent in responses to the Player's Poll this time! It seems like there are a whole lot of you out there who've never played Mario RPG. Well, you're in for a treat!

CARTER'S CORNER

Hello again!

The answer to the last quiz is Purple Pikmin, because they're kind of overpowered. I would invent Digging Pikmin, which would be a lot like Drill Kirby. (Or the new Drill Mario!) They could dig under walls to get treasures and other stuff.

I'm really excited for Super Mario Bros. Wonder, which will already be out as you're reading this! I've banked lots of my video game time, so I can play lots of it. And then maybe beat it on my birthday! After that is Part 2 of the Scarlet & Violet DLC, which I hope releases in December, because Mario Wonder might have bonus worlds. I'm wondering if the Koopalings will be in it! (They've been absent for too long!)

Quiz Time! What do I think should be in Part 2 of Scarlet & Violet's DLC? What do *you* think? See you next time!

BETTER LATE THAN NEVER!

Happy 8th Birthday! Or is it 50th? Either way, we want to thank you for your continued dedication to your craft. It is obvious that every issue is produced with love and care, masterfully written with great attention to thematic detail. Oddly enough, our oldest child was 8 years old when you started NF, and we have loyally subscribed since the eighth issue (back-purchasing Issues 1-7). If I had a dollar for every moment one of my children peruse an issue, I'd likely have enough to pay for a lifetime subscription. Keep up the great work! Looking forward to Issue #50 . . . and 100 . . . and 150 . . . ! **– THE MILLERS**

OK, so, we're printing this photo three years late. Apologies for the ridiculous delay! We missed including it in NF #50, but it's posed so well that I had to eventually give it a spot! (Miller family, if you want to create an updated version of this same snapshot, I'll print it next time. Promise!)

THE PLAYER'S POLL

Congratulations to **Blake Crandell**, the winner of our most recent Player's Poll! Your new chance to win is below, and this time around we're interested to read your responses to three questions about the other upcoming remakes!

QUESTION #1

Beyond Super Mario RPG, the Switch is getting several more remakes in the next year. Which one of them has you most excited, and why?

QUESTION #2

What are your thoughts on all the different terms like remake, remaster and reimagining? How do you define each one?

QUESTION #3

What's the one pie-in-the-sky, never-gonna-happen video game remake announcement that, if it actually *did* happen, would make you cry from joy?

Send your responses to **PlayersPoll@NFMagazine.com** with the subject line "Player's Poll for Issue #69" – this time, one reader whose answers are picked for print will win the 2024 Nintendo Switch remake of their choice. Good luck!

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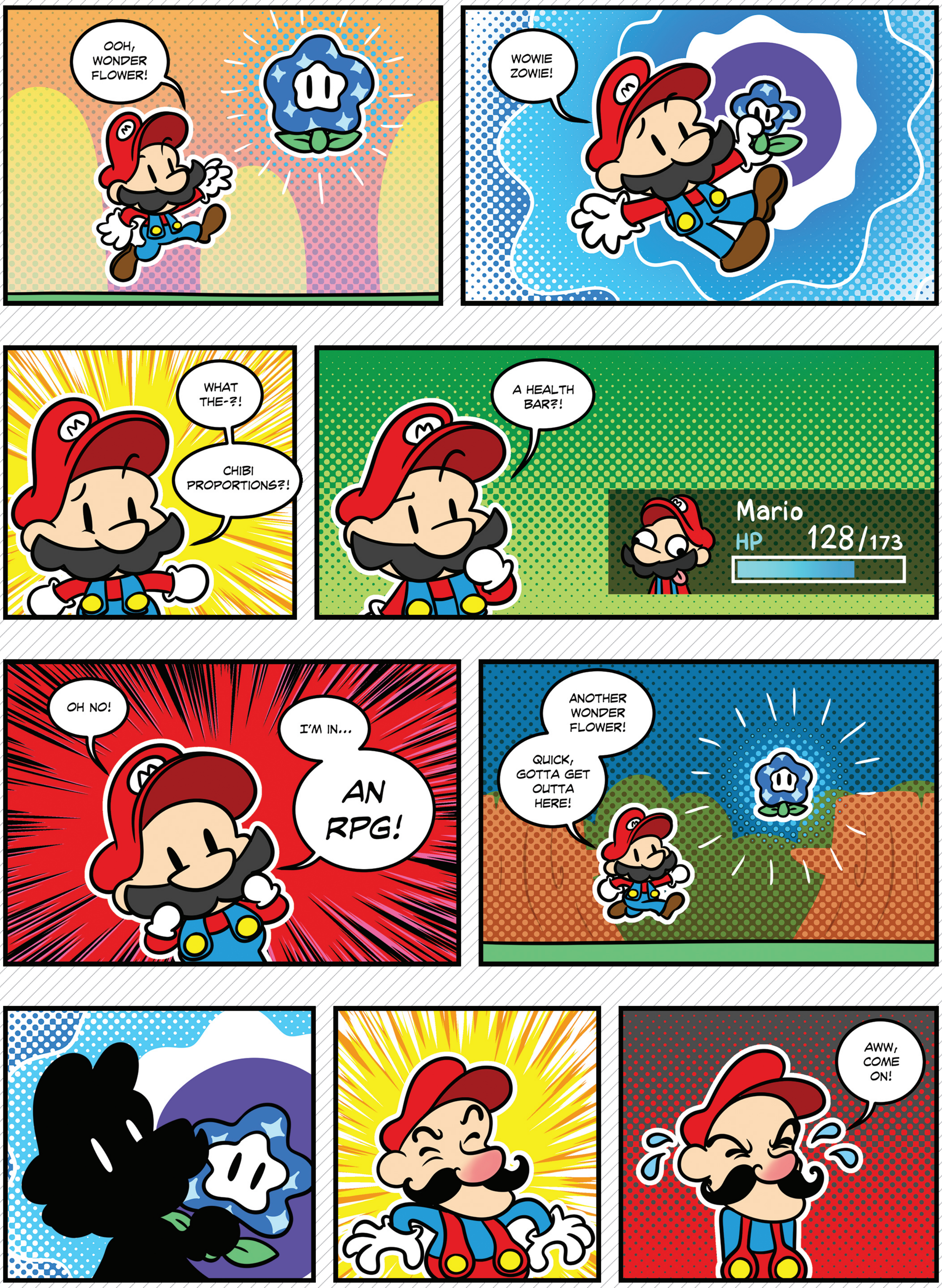


BY MATTHEW LOFFHAGEN

Charles Martinet is Mario No More

The iconic voice actor will no longer play his most famous role.

CHARLES MARTINET WAS not the first voice of Mario. That honor goes to Peter Cullen, best known for playing Optimus Prime. Cullen played the plumber in a Saturday morning cartoon adaptation of Donkey Kong back in 1983, predating his performance as the emblematic Autobot by a year. Charles isn't the most famous Mario actor either! That title would go to Bob Hoskins, Captain Lou Albano or Chris Pratt, depending on what type of entertainer you deem to be the most renowned (classically trained thespians, legendary professional wrestlers or modern superhero movie stars, respectively).

But despite steep competition, Martinet's performance stands head and shoulders above the rest, in both longevity and recognizability. A big part of that comes down to his approach.

In a September 2023 interview at GalaxyCon in Austin, Martinet retold the tale of when he first auditioned for the role: his initial instinct was to do a stereotypical "Italian plumber from Brooklyn," saying things like "Get outta my face, I'm workin' here!" But that would "not be fun to do for eight hours a day." So instead, he modified an accent he had used for Gremio in a stage performance of Shakespeare's Taming of the Shrew, making it younger and sillier, ad-libbing lines like "Hello, I'm Mario! Let's make pizza pie together!" And the rest was history. His "Woo-Hoo!"s and "Let's-a-go!"s are among the most iconic vocal performances of all time, in gaming or otherwise, which is likely why Nintendo stuck with him for so long.

Starting with Mario Teaches Typing in 1994 (or Gottlieb's Super Mario Pinball game in 1992, depending on who you ask) all the way through to Mario + Rabbids: Sparks of Hope in 2022, Charles Martinet has been the mouth behind gaming's most recognized mustache. But now, his time as Mario has come to a close, at least in games. He's moving to a new position, the first ever "Mario Ambassador," where he will presumably continue to do whatever Mario voices he wants at live events and other promotional pursuits.

So after all this time, why is he stepping away? He's gone on record a few times saying that he wanted to continue doing the voice for the rest of his life, and Nintendo clearly likes him too, or else they wouldn't have created a brand-new position for him.

We can guess that the publisher simply wants to try something new. Just about every other big-name, long-standing game character, from Sonic to Solid Snake, has eventually had more than one actor attached to them. So this sort of refresh is semi-standard for the industry . . . and it also may explain why Martinet didn't play Mario in the movie. Along those lines, if Nintendo does a fully-voiced Mario RPG someday, it would probably make sense for him to sound a bit more like he does in the movies. That could also open the door for Martinet to play Mario's father in a game, just like he did in the film! Either way, we're hoping he gets to continue to work in the Mario universe in whatever capacity he can for as long as he still loves it. We're guessing that will be a very long time! **— JONATHAN**

"If Charles was forced out of the role of Mario, there's no way that he or Nintendo would ever tell us. Neither would want to hurt innocent fans' positive perception of the Mario brand by airing that dirty laundry!"
– JONATHAN

Kevin Can't Wait!

Mario's new voice actor has already been revealed!

SUPER MARIO 64 was the game that really brought Charles Martinet to the attention of Nintendo fans, as his iconic lines like "Let's-a go!" and "Thank-a you so much for-to playing my game" instantly redefined the sound of the company's most iconic character. It kicked off an entirely new era for Mario's voice that has now come to an end – and, perhaps poetically, the person who's now taking up the torch to lead the Mushroom Kingdom's hero into his next era wasn't even around when the last one began!

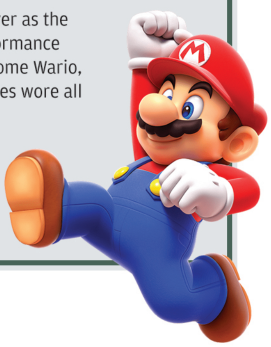
Super Mario 64 was released in North America on September 29, 1996. Six weeks later, on November 9, 1996, Kevin Afghani was born.

Faithful readers, say hello to the new Mario! (He's pretty young.)

Kevin confirmed his casting as the new voice of Mario a few days in advance of the release of Super Mario Bros. Wonder. That is officially his first work as the character, so every time you hear Mario exclaim with joy, yelp in pain or say "Wowie Zowie!" when transforming into an elephant in Wonder's worlds, it's Mr. Afghani's recordings, and not Mr. Martinet's any more.

In addition to Mario, Kevin has also taken over as the voice of Luigi, and Wonder marks his first performance of him as well. (No word yet on if he'll also become Wario, Waluigi, Baby Mario and Baby Luigi too – Charles wore all those different hats, but Nintendo might just decide to divvy them up a bit more now.)

Martinet's Mario is surely the toughest act to follow in gaming history, but Kevin seems more than capable! **– LUCAS**



Hi, I'm New Daisy!

It's not just Mario who's got a new voice.

WHILE A FEW of the voices in Super Mario Bros. Wonder are the same as they've been for years – like Kenny James performing as Bowser, and Samantha Kelly speaking up as Princess Peach and all of the Toad characters – there is one more new face in the recording booth alongside Kevin, giving him some company as another rookie on the team. Say hello now to Giselle Fernandez, the new voice of Princess Daisy!

Giselle announced the news on the day Super Mario Bros. Wonder went on sale, as Nintendo had been extremely tight-lipped about revealing the voice cast's identities before the game's release. Probably because there was such an outpouring of support for Charles Martinet when it was revealed that he was stepping away from voicing Mario! I think Nintendo got caught off-guard a bit by just how beloved he had become to the fans, so they've been trying to ease into these voice transitions more cautiously since then.

Though it hasn't gotten nearly as much attention throughout the fandom, Giselle taking over the role of Daisy is also marking the end of nearly as long an era: that being Deanna Mustard's 20-year tenure as the Sarasaland princess' voice before this point! She had been voicing Daisy ever since 2003's Mario Golf: Toadstool Tour and really solidified her personality across the last two decades, so I'm sure becoming the new Daisy is just as intimidating a job for Giselle as Mario is for Kevin!

Both Kevin and Giselle had done some voicework for Nintendo prior to getting this call up to the big leagues – Kevin had done some Switch commercials, and Giselle voiced both Malice and Neimi in Fire Emblem Heroes. I want to wish good luck to them both, here at the beginning of what could be their own decades-long runs in these roles! **– LUCAS**

Capture the Loyal Three!

... alongside tons of other merchandise inspired by The Teal Mask.

FEZANDIPITI, OKIDOGI AND MUNKIDORI plushes have been released in Pokémon Centers in Japan! (Oh, and that evil little Ogerpon too, for anyone who'd actually support that monster!) They all hail from the just-launched Teal Mask DLC. I remember in my early days of collecting having to wait nearly a year before merchandise from a new game would hit. Often now it's within a few months – but leave it to The Pokémon Company to have it released simultaneously!

The plushes may be the star of the show, but they were released alongside a slew of other items. There's a mini shoulder bag featuring the Hidden Treasure of Area Zero logo, several hand towel designs and even socks that feature the new 'mons. The most expensive items on the list are green or blue jinbei outfits that are around $70 each. A good import shop or Japanese shopping proxy can help you obtain these, or you could wait to see if the plushes jump the Pacific.

Paldea at Proper Scale

The Pokémon Scale World product line expands to include Scarlet & Violet.

JULIANA, NEMONA AND a whole mess of scaled Pokémon figures from the Paldea region are releasing this December and January. Sprigatito, Floragato, Fuecoco, Crocalor, Quaxly, Quaxwell, Meowscarada and Quaquaval hit first for around $40, and Skeledirge and Pawmot hit next, but cost closer to $80 due to being larger. These sets have been steadily releasing since their inception in 2021, and despite breaking some wallets, they've made fans thrilled with their quality!

LEGO Piranha Plant!

Build and display this very finest of potted plants in your home.

PIRANHA PLANTS HAVE had some serious spikes in popularity lately! One debuted as a fighter in Smash Ultimate, several are prominently displayed at Super Nintendo World and now there's this LEGO set. Weighing in at 540 pieces, this little chomper has lots of poseability, including its mouth and leaves. It comes with a pipe to house it and two coins that supposedly reveal their use after it's built. This set releases on November 6, and I can't wait until it joins my Piranha Plant statue, figures, lamp, plushes, puppet, amiibo, gripper toy, slippers, keychains and charms!

amiibo UPDATE

WHAT A HUGE month for amiibo news – and over a decade after the brand's initial release!

First, the new three-pack featuring the Splatoon 3 "Deep Cut" announcers Shiver, Frye and Big Man sadly won't be made available in North America, but each of the three will be available to grab separately. They go on sale on November 17, at the normal price of $15.99 each.

The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom is seeing its amiibo collection expanded with two more amiibo: Zelda with the repaired Master Sword and rehydrated big boy Ganondorf. (Ganondorf is $20 because of his larger presence.) Scanning these into Tears will give you some rare materials and, potentially, new Paraglider fabrics.

There's also been a mess of other amiibo that have been re-released since our last amiibo Update. Several of the original Mario line have been slowly reappearing in stores, including Mario, Luigi, Yoshi and Peach. There were also re-releases for several of the more rare Zelda amiibos, and they even re-released some of the 30th anniversary amiibo to help folks complete their scanning collection: Skyward Sword Link, Wind Waker Link and Twilight Princess Link all have new life now. Even several of the original Smash Bros. amiibo line, featuring several of the classic characters, also got a rerun!

All of this pales into comparison to the news from the last Direct, though. Something I had been speculating about for several amiibo Updates – and something many fans had given up hope for – finally got announced: the Sora amiibo! Sora was announced as a fighter back in October of 2021, and his current official amiibo release date is 2024. This finally completes the Smash Bros. line. Everyone truly is here, in one form or another!

But the Direct had even more amiibo news, leaving us salivating for the January 19, 2024 release of new Noah and Mio amiibo figures for Xenoblade Chronicles 3. Considering how fast Pyra and Mythra sold out, and how high their price has soared, it'd be wise to nail down a pre-order if you want the pair. If all else fails, import!

With the iconic Smash line wrapping up and the other games mentioned having not much else to offer moving forward, where does amiibo go from here? Obviously there are a few amiibo left to appear in 2024, but will we see Super Mario Bros. Wonder amiibo? Rumors abound of a new console emerging from Nintendo within a year, so having NFC scanning remain is a nebulous notion. While several signs point to amiibo's potential swan song, if the Sora announcement has taught us anything, it's to never say never! Regardless, what a ride!

BY BRETT MARTIN

Another Nintendo Store has Opened!

This time around they're sticking close to home, near the corporate headquarters in Kyoto!

I'M NOT ONE to brag, but I did just rank up into the Sapphire League on Duolingo.

I know, I know! Humble much? But I'm about one whole month into my new app-based quest to learn to read Japanese, and I'm definitely killin' it. At this rate I'll surely be fluent in, say, another five years or so?

OK, so I've got a long way to go, but I honestly am beginning to invest a bit more time into studying Nintendo's native language, because I want to have the most fun possible when I eventually get to actually travel there, and actually get to visit places like the official Nintendo Stores!

You're surely already familiar with the one location that's open here in North America: Nintendo New York (or just "Nintendo NY"), at Rockefeller Center in the Big Apple. But more of the Stores can now be found in Japan: Nintendo Tokyo opened its doors in 2019, Nintendo Osaka followed suit a year ago in 2022, and now there's a brand-new Nintendo Kyoto that just welcomed its first customers this past October 17.

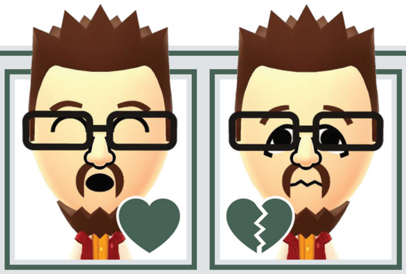
Out of them all, Nintendo Kyoto will surely become the most sought-after of the stores to visit, because of it being in the same city as Nintendo's base of operations!

Nintendo has been based in Kyoto ever since the company was founded all the way back in the year 1889. The current headquarters is less than three miles away from this new Store location, which has opened on the seventh floor of a department store called Kyoto Takashimaya SC.

The new store is packed with items celebrating first-party franchises like Mario, Zelda, Splatoon, Pikmin and Animal Crossing. Many of the wares will be shared with the other Stores, but Kyoto will also have exclusive goods, including those that were made available for the launch day (pictured directly above).

I wouldn't hold it against you if you went straight to a travel site to start booking airline tickets right away, but if you can hold off a few more months, there will be yet another Nintendo attraction opening in the Kyoto area soon: the official Nintendo Museum! It was announced as the "Nintendo Gallery" a few years ago, but work on its building and surrounding grounds is set to conclude in March, with an opening date for visitors to be set at some point shortly after that. So, if you wait, you could visit the Museum, shop at the Store and stay at the hotel that was built in the original HQ, all in the same whirlwind trip! **— LUCAS**

Great!
新しいお店
すごいですね!



Oh.
"Nintendo Kentucky" is still a low priority.

FORECAST

A meteorological look at the biggest game and DLC releases currently scheduled to debut in the next few months.

THE MONTH OF November will reach only its second day before the Star Ocean series will be ready to retell its second story! Star Ocean: The Second Story R arrives on store shelves on November 2. If you're unfamiliar with Star Ocean, that would be understandable – it's an RPG series that got its start in the RPG golden age of the mid-'90s, but that first game never came to America. This one's a good starting point! See Page 48.

FROM THE SECOND story in the Star Ocean series we shift focus to the second coming of the Wii classic WarioWare: Smooth Moves. Just like that original body-moving masterpiece from back in 2007, Move It! will get you up off the couch and get you moving in all kinds of weird and wacky ways. It will be available on November 3. More on Page 51!

WE'RE DOING THINGS a little differently for this next game on our Forecast list: Instead of preparing a traditional preview, we instead scored an exclusive interview with its legendary creator, Yu Suzuki! Air Twister calls back to his early days of arcade shoot-'em-up game design, and it's set to go on sale on November 10. Read more from Mr. Suzuki in this issue's featured Interview, starting on Page 59!

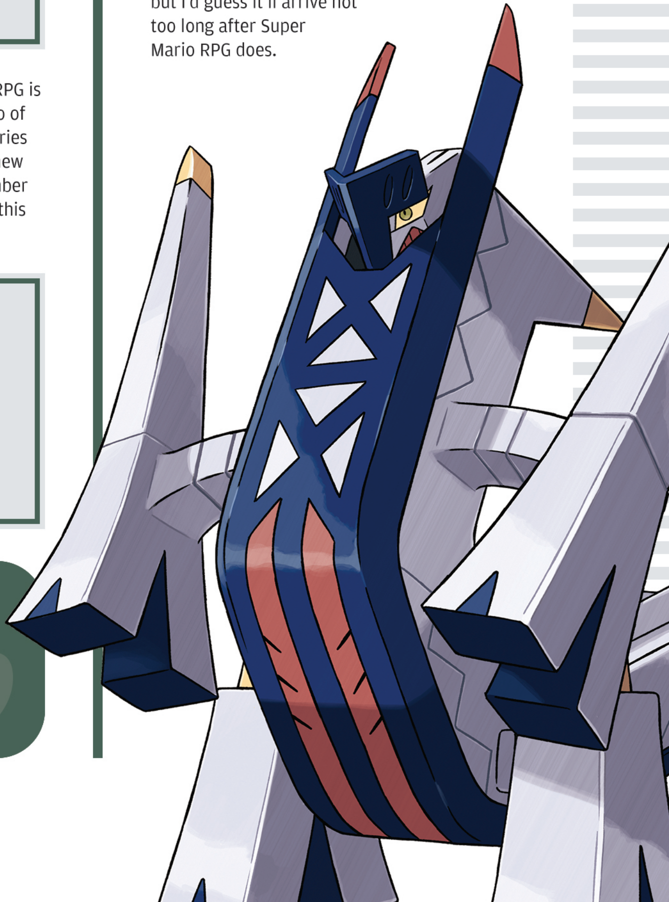
ONE WEEK AFTER the air gets all twisted, the crisp, clean breezes off autumn will gust past the cloudfolk of Nimbus Land and rustle the leaves of the Forest Maze once more in the gorgeous-looking remake of Super Mario RPG! November 17 will be when we can return to Mario's role-playing world, and to get prepared, flip ahead to Page 39!

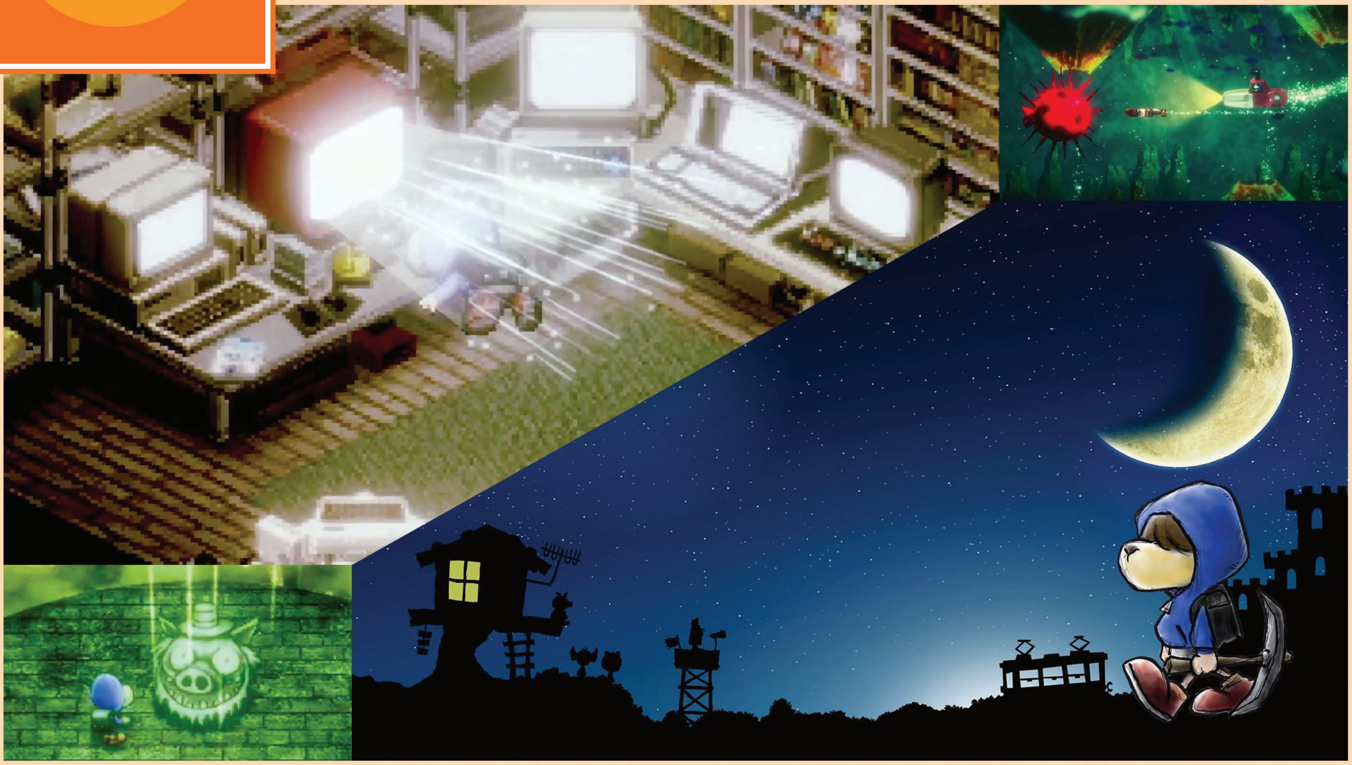
STAR OCEAN KICKED us off with an RPG, Super Mario RPG is obviously an RPG, and to give this RPG issue Forecast a trio of RPGs to look forward to, here's the latest spin-off in the series that says "RPG" more than any other: Dragon Quest! This new sequel is due to drop in early December. As early in December as possible, actually: December 1! We've got a preview for this one too, so check it out on Page 46.

FINALLY, LET'S TAKE one quick glimpse ahead into the 2024 release schedule. Nintendo will be leading off next year with a two-in-one package of remakes that should appeal to role-playing fans (even if they're more point-and-click adventures than they are RPGs). If you want to know more, you know what to do: Flip ahead to the Previews!

"There's no better time than the chilliest months on the calendar to cuddle up inside and pour a serious number of hours into deeply exploring a great RPG or two. I've been crazily busy this year juggling this magazine and the new Iwata book and my five-kid family, but I do hope to set aside some time after the books have shipped to sit down and immerse myself in some new role-playing worlds. (And at least one old one, in Super Mario RPG!) — **LUCAS**"

OUR REVIEW OF Part 1 of the Pokémon Scarlet & Violet DLC, The Hidden Treasure of Area Zero, lies ahead in the Download section – you'll find Carter was kind with his thoughts, while mine were more harsh. Though I had plenty of complaints about what Game Freak presented for us in the Kitakami region, I'm still interested to see what they'll serve up for Part 2 of the DLC: The Indigo Disk. We know that we'll be flying off to the Blueberry Academy to take part in plenty of high-level battles, and we'll also get a chance to meet the new evolution of Duraludon seen below: Archaludon! Still no exact date for this DLC as we go to press, but I'd guess it'll arrive not too long after Super Mario RPG does.





The Anti-RPG Originators Return

From the makers of Moon, a new adventure appears: Stray Children!

MASCOTS LIKE MARIO can be an important branding tool, but the people behind the games we play do more to determine their quality than what cartoon character stars in them. That's why, for some diehard fans of Mario RPGs, the upcoming release of Stray Children is just as exciting as the prospect of playing games like The Thousand-Year Door on the Switch. The creators behind this new indie RPG are industry veterans, and at least one of them worked on Mario's very first outing in the genre!

Specifically, this game's development team includes director Yoshiro Kimura (interviewed in NF #47), artist Kurashima Kazuyuki and composer Hirofumi Tanguchi. Their collective credits include such beloved titles as the "anti-RPG" Moon, Chibi-Robo!, Romancing SaGa 3, Tingle's Freshly Picked Rosy Rupeeland and none other than Super Mario RPG. They've been working together at Onion Games for a little while now, but most of their recent titles have been mobile-friendly outings like Dandy Dungeon and Mon Amour. Stray Children marks their return to a full-sized, home console-style RPG.

Stray Children stars a dog in a blue sweatshirt who gets sucked into the world of Famicom video games. There he meets many children, most dressed as animals, who have their own ideas about how to live. Most battles appear to be against monsters and adults, who sometimes eat children. Like in Undertale, which was heavily influenced by Kimura's earlier titles, the combat looks like a mix of turn-based attacks, real-time dodging and verbal negotiation, making pacifist runs a possibility. The game is set for release in Japan this Winter, and the West at some point next year. **— JONATHAN**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: ONION GAMES RELEASE: TBA 2024 RATING: RP

Rebirth of the Original Run 'n Gun

Konami and WayForward welcome us back to the jungle in Contra: Operation Galuga.

KONAMI HAS REVEALED a most unexpected – and most pleasant – surprise.

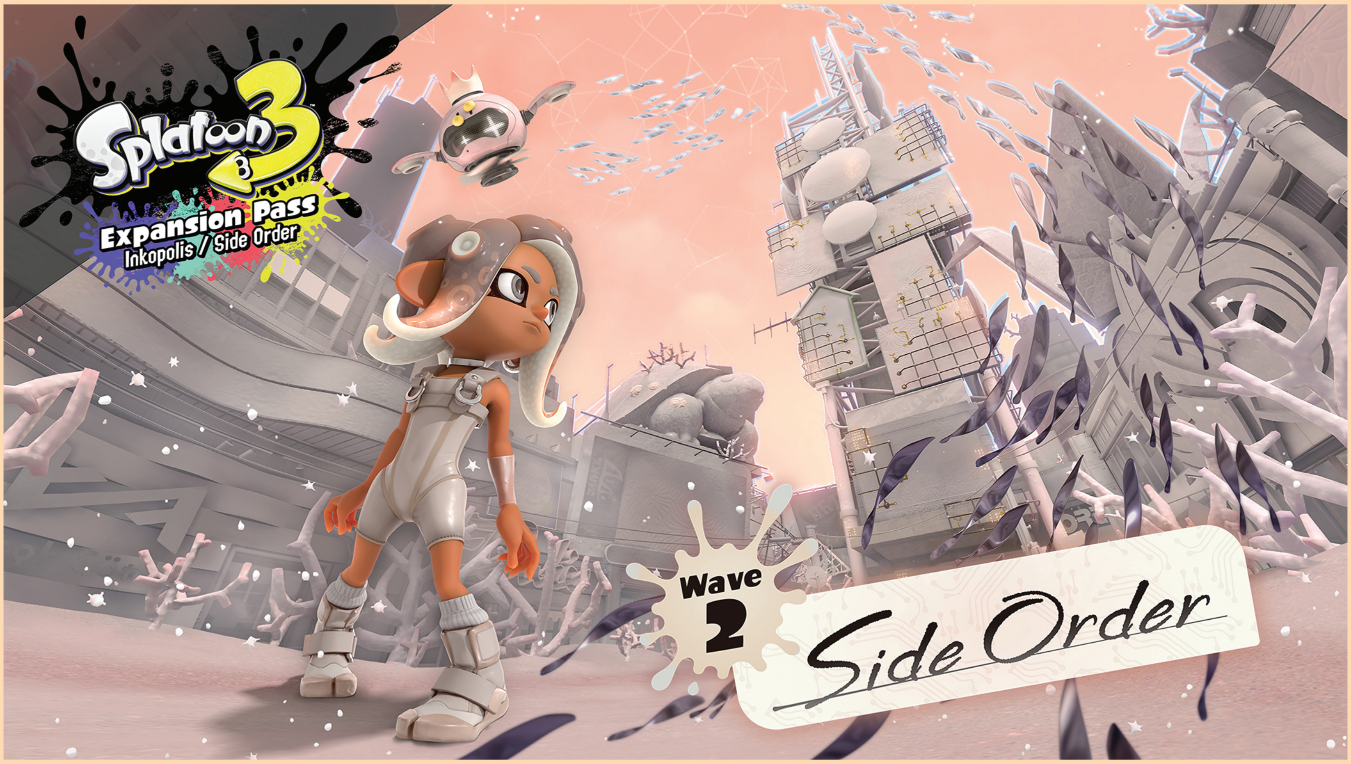
It would seem that Contra: Rogue Corps didn't live up to their expectations for how to bring the series into the modern day for a new audience, so they've re-partnered with WayForward (the studio that crafted the critically acclaimed Contra 4 for Nintendo DS) to go back to square one – literally! Contra: Operation Galuga is a remake of the original Contra game that blasted its way into arcades and made the Konami Code famous on the NES. And we don't mean something as simple as an upgrade to the graphics and sound, like the mobile Contra: Evolution; this is a full-on reimagining of that landmark title.

The story (yes, there is one) and setting are the same as the original NES classic, but new elements from titles further in the timeline have been retroactively added. From homing missiles and hovercycle chases to stacking weapons and Overloading them, Red Falcon's forces aren't going to know what hit 'em, though longtime fans of the series may recognize some of them. And there's even a health bar now, too? Is . . . is that *allowed?*

The original Contra is well-known for its two-player cooperative experience, and that remains here – for Story Mode, at least. Switch over to Arcade Mode, and new additions Lucia Drake and Ariana (or maybe you'd prefer the PAL favorite, Probotector?) can join Bill and Lance for four-player mayhem!

While all of this gives us some idea of what to expect, there may yet still be much to be revealed. We'll no doubt find out more of what awaits us when we visit the Galuga archipelago again in early 2024. (And be sure not to miss our next issue, because we just might be getting our readers a little extra recon on this one!) **— DAVID**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: KONAMI
DEVELOPER: WAYFORWARD
RELEASE: EARLY 2024 RATING: RP



ORDER UP!

Nintendo's got something special cooking for Splatoon 3's Side Order.

I'VE HAD A blast with Splatoon 3, as since writing our review exactly one year ago, I've contined to dip back into its endlessly replayable inkwell again and again. Most of my time has been spent in the Salmon Run mode, since I prefer its cooperation to the PVP competition of Turf Wars – and since I did a full clear of the story mode long ago. But, soon, an all-new story mode will be added to Splatoon 3's menu!

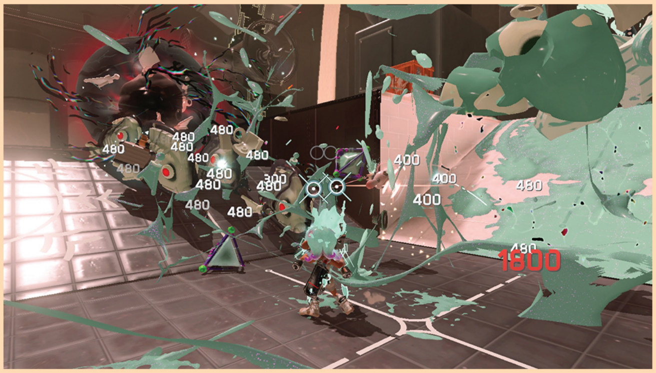
"Side Order" is the name Nintendo's given to Wave 2 of the Splatoon 3 DLC, a title that pulls double duty as a food pun and a reference to the Chaos vs. Order Final Splatfest that closed out Splatoon 2 several years ago. That's deliberate, too, since this new story is heavily Splatoon 2-inspired!

First up, the playable protagonist is Eight, the Octoling we first met as the hero of Splatoon 2's Octo Expansion. Second, Eight's being joined on this new journey by Splatoon 2's Pearl – though she's now somehow taken the form of a hovering robot helper? She'll tag along as you make your way up the Spire of Order, the colorless tower that's calling back to Marina's Team Order from that old Splatfest.

So, will Marina appear? And, if so, in what capacity? Has she been inknapped, and needs to be rescued? Is she perhaps the villain we'll have to face in the end? We don't know!

We do know a bit about the lesser villains we'll face, though: They're new enemies, at long last! Though I gave Splatoon 3 a solid 9.0 review score, I did lament its lacking enemy variety. It just used the same old Octarian foes we'd fought in past games in its story mode! That was a disappointment. Now, though, we'll be facing off against waves of all-new fishy foes.

Side Order seems to be structured differently than any past Splatoon campaign, too. You'll get access to the "Pearl Palette" to upgrade and customize Eight's abilities, and Nintendo has stated that they wanted to make this campaign be more replayable than before. Could that mean it'll be shorter overall, encouraging repeat runs? Or could it be taking a few pages from the roguelike genre, giving you a different play experience each time? We'll see next Fresh Season! **— LUCAS**



DLC PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: NINTENDO
RELEASE DATE: SPRING 2023 RATING: E10+

Inspired by Super Mario RPG!

ANOTHER CRUSADE

LET'S CUT STRAIGHT to it: The developers at Dragon Vein have faithfully recreated the aesthetic and battle system from Super Mario RPG for Another Crusade, but the similarities end there – as the game's overbearing difficulty crushes any hope of this being a worthwhile homage.

It's not that the game is just a challenge – it's that its difficulty comes more from bad design elements and a decision to be hard for the sake of being hard. I've heard this game's challenge compared to Dark Souls, but that game was smart about failure where Another Crusade isn't. I was on the ropes without a way to heal after the first three enemy encounters, scrambling for a way to progress. Your only hope is to run away from everything, find a checkpoint that heals you, and grind. Even after grinding more than I thought was necessary, I was still running to the next checkpoint. This never changed or got easier.

The demon boss in the castle revealed the whole picture. Niro Hielt the wizard has a water spell that turns the demon into something Rai Reysend the knight can fight. The problem is that Rai has one item to revive Niro should Niro fall, and Niro *will* fall. There is no way to level Niro up because he first appears during this battle. If the demon reverts to its invincible form and Niro is down twice, Rai has no recourse.

The game also demands perfect timing to defend and attack, having the discrepancy between a Miss and a Perfect being nearly four times the latter. It's ludicrous and only leads to frustration. I scraped by to continue, but had I not been reviewing the game it was a big enough red flag to stop playing. The game continues to add party members shortly before difficult sections, not giving you a chance to learn their timing or upgrade their equipment. Upgrades are generally only found in chests, which are incredibly dangerous and tedious to find. The game's labyrinthine levels are not accompanied by a mini-map, and only get more convoluted the further you go.

The characters are mostly analogues of SMRPG's. Rai can jump and doesn't speak, like Mario; Niro is a naive wizard like Mallow; Varenna Nomagy heals like Peach but also has science-based fire magic; Zhion Draico has big attacks, is very grumpy and was even previously defeated by Rai; and Vincent Delmonte is wise but an outcast. Why mirror the battle system but also steal the character personalities?

The game's myriad other problems, like the jarring camera allowing tough enemies and bosses to potentially surprise attack you, bland music, commands being too small to see and a lack of landmarks to allow for exploration compound an already exasperating and largely unenjoyable experience. **– BRETT**

6.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER: LIMITED RUN GAMES DEVELOPER: DRAGON VEIN STUDIOS RATING: E10+

Reilluminating the Light Warriors

FINAL FANTASY PIXEL REMASTER

THE PASSING YEARS can change us in ways we aren't always aware of, leading our relationships with legacy media to evolve in unexpected ways. Re-examining games from the past can change how we see ourselves, and give us a new understanding of the present. Ironically enough, going back a few decades to get a new sense of things is *[spoilers for a 35-year-old game!]* the plot twist of Final Fantasy 1. In its own way, the inaugural entry in this legendary RPG franchise was always about "remastering" time, in that mastering its final boss fights allows you to rewrite history.

Thankfully, the core elements of the game remain unchanged. They're also the same ingredients that have maintained the Final Fantasy formula ever since. Magic crystals, Black Mages frying goblins with Firaga spells, spending gil and taking trips on airships are all still a part of the mythos. Final Fantasy 1 even has a random sliding puzzle minigame, which feels like the great-grandpa of later Final Fantasy genre diversions like FF7's Gold Saucer Chocobo Racing and FF8's Triple Triad card game. Like looking at baby pictures of a famous celebrity, you can see the beginnings of some features here that would become more defined and complex later on.

Outside of being the one that started it all, the thing that makes Final Fantasy 1 stand out from the pack is the vast space it leaves for your own imagination. Before the game begins, you create a party of four adventurers by choosing their job class (Fighter, Thief, Black Belt, Red Mage, White Mage, Black Mage). From there, they remain blank slates for the entirety of your adventure. Their only "character growth" takes place with Pokémon-style evolutions partway through their journey that makes them physically grow into smaller-headed, more muscular friends. And other than the plot twist mentioned before, the narrative is mostly a series of fetchquests to encourage exploration and item collection. It's less about telling a specific story and more about opening up a world where players can create their own tales, mostly focused on gaining levels to defeat creatures that you once saw as unstoppable.

That kind of old-school grind may be too repetitive and boring for players today. So on top of giving the pixel art a total top-to-bottom 16-bit-style redraw, and offering both classic and remixed versions of the soundtrack, this remaster allows you to apply artificial boosts to post-battle XP and money. It also lets you turn random battles off entirely! Activating those "cheats" makes the game a breeze – and a lot shorter – but they're purely optional. Switching between the standard settings and new enhancements is the best way to draw out the contrasting flavors of the old and the new.

Unfortunately, the additional dungeons and bonuses seen in past re-releases of Final Fantasy 1 for the GBA, PSP and other platforms are missing – making arguments that this is the definitive version of the game a little hard to "square." But all in all, it's a great update. What could have been a dated slog was transformed into a digestible romp through time that may hit veterans in an all-new way. **– JONATHAN**

8.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: SQUARE ENIX RATING: E

Originally Skipped in the States

FINAL FANTASY II PIXEL REMASTER

ONE OF THE Final Fantasy series' most enduring traits is its desire to take risks in its sequels, which began with their very first follow-up, the controversial Final Fantasy II. While this remake smooths out some of the rougher edges of the original Famicom adventure, it still lacks the wide appeal of its brethren.

That said, there are some major firsts here! FFII – not to be confused with the SNES game of the same name – is the first title in the series that attempts a dramatic, intriguing story. A band of rebels is ousted from their hometown by a power-hungry emperor and forced to take refuge in a nearby base. Not only do we get the first appearances of series mainstays like an evil empire, noble dragoons and perky Chocobos, but the story is also positively littered with tragedy. Several towns succumb to destruction and the tale doesn't shy away from the deaths of a number of playable characters – years before this franchise became infamous for exactly that storytelling element.

Unfortunately, the story itself doesn't land the way it should. While the sweeping soundtrack attempts to pull at the heartstrings, this is a very simple tale: dynamic for the '80s but lacking weight because we barely know the characters who fall in the line of battle. The players come and go with little in the way of personality or fanfare, so it's tough to really get attached to anyone.

While your merry band is traversing the large, interconnected map, it's easy to lose sight of your goals due to the obscured progression system. I'm no stranger to RPGs, but I often found myself wandering back and forth between towns in a vain attempt at figuring out what to do next in my quest. There's a nifty password system where you can recall special phrases and ask NPCs about them, but it can be all too easy to overlook one of these, get lost, then feel the temptation to scramble online for some quick answers.

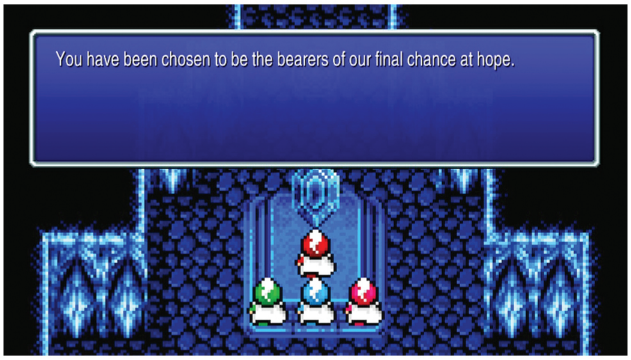
Also tempting is the "Random Encounters Off" toggle. See, FFII has ridiculously frequent battles, and what's worse is that they're extremely consistent: You will get into a fight after roughly every four seconds of movement. If makes the far-too-sprawling dungeons much more of a chore when you have to navigate serpentine paths and dozens of empty dead-end rooms knowing that battle is constantly inevitable. I played through FFI Pixel Remaster without ever turning off the battles, but I couldn't do it for this one; it's too much of a slog.

Normally I'm up for a good dungeon crawl, but FFII's progression system is bizarre and opaque. The idea is that you get stronger via specific choices in battle – level up your sword by attacking, your HP by being hit, your magic by casting spells, etc. – which sounds pretty cool on paper but ends up making battles play out very strangely. Often, the most strategic approach is what's worse for your characters' growth long-term.

All that being said, as an important stepping stone for the growth of the series, FFII's innovations might be worth a look for the most patient Final Fantasy fans. **– MATTHEW T.**

6.5

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: SQUARE ENIX RATING: E10+



The Brothers' Journey!

FINAL FANTASY III PIXEL REMASTER

DON'T WORRY, EVERYONE: I've sent my kids to save the world!

Since Final Fantasy III (really VI) was such a foundational RPG for me, I've always had it in the back of my mind that I should make time to play the actual Final Fantasy III at some point. I've been reluctant to do so for decades, though, because it's fully fixated on one feature I've agonized over in these pages in the past: custom character creation.

I want established heroes! I want canon names, and set abilities, and an adventure that I can just sit back and enjoy instead of having to make too many critical decisions along the way. Final Fantasy III (really VI) gave me that. Final Fantasy III does not.

This game is all-in on customizing your characters, from the very first moment when you have to name all four of them. So, I went with my kids.

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: SQUARE ENIX RATING: T

The latest Warriors of Light are none other than Carter, Calvin, Cooper and Colson, my four oldest sons. They began their journey as Onion Knights, the generic starter job in this game, but then quickly promoted into unique roles. Carter, with his newly unruly, too-lengthy hair, became a long-haired Red Mage to lead the team with a combination of swordplay and sorcery. Calvin, fast with his feet and his fists, became a martial arts-focused Monk. Cooper, of furious fighting spirit, became a dual sword-wielding Warrior. And, finally, our quiet and contemplative Colson, who loves reading books, is a magic spell-slinging Black Mage in this world.

Now that may all seem entirely silly to you, but personalizing these characters in that way honestly did get me more invested in this game I've avoided for so long. It's genuine fun to see my boys succeed!

And success comes much more easily in this Pixel Remaster than in past versions of this same adventure. I opted to use the Boost feature to increase XP and Gil by 4X each, streamlining the journey by making every random battle I fought count as four battles instead. Grinding becomes almost a total non-factor at that speed, as Level Ups are so frequent that you can't ever get frustrated.

Though I probably should have dialed the multipliers back a bit, since the first big boss fell to my boys' combined might in less than two rounds of combat. I would've liked a bit more challenge than that.

Final Fantasy III felt fresh and fun to me, as since I've neither played any of this particular sequel in the past nor even watched anyone else run through it, all its settings and characters were new to me. I didn't expect to see Cid! Apparently this is the second-ever Cid? I didn't know!

Though quality-of-life upgrades make the game mostly breezy, there are still some stumbling blocks: You do have to do a lot of management to keep your heroes developing well, including hand-picking magic spells for Mages to learn. And spells are weirdly limited like they are in D&D: One scene called for me to cast Mini to shrink the heroes, but I could only cast Mini three times per day, so I had to shrink three of them, then rest at an Inn, then complete the job. That could've been streamlined.

For the most part, though, this game proved to be much more fun than I expected! More jobs open up as the quest continues, offer more flexibility . . . Makes me wonder what jobs my boys will ultimately choose for themselves in life! **— LUCAS**

8.5

The Dark Knight Returns

FINAL FANTASY IV PIXEL REMASTER

WHILE IT MAY not be the best game in the series, Final Fantasy IV is arguably the quintessential Final Fantasy. Originally released under the title "Final Fantasy II" on the SNES, the game culls together previous ideas into a cohesive whole that set a new standard for the series: a tale of romance, treachery, intrigue, sacrifice, airships and Chocobos.

The story this time centers on Cecil, a high-ranking captain of the formidable kingdom of Baron. Like a medieval Les Misérables, Cecil's story begins with him committing heinous acts and subsequently seeking atonement. While a bit simplistic in retrospect, his tale of redemption is one of the most endearing elements of FFIV's plot. And with friends such as the demure Rosa, the spunky Rydia, the easy-going Cid and the mischievous twin mages Palom and Porom, the rest of the large cast is similarly likable (or at least interesting, in the case of Kain). It's a diverse group, although one aspect many of the characters share is selflessly putting themselves in danger to help save the team. It's nice to see, but after the third or forth noble sacrifice (some of which the game later backtracks on), it can feel a little cheap and is probably the weakest part of an otherwise great little story.

Characters will come and go throughout your travels, but what's constant is how well-paced this RPG is. Unlike its predecessors, it doesn't get too bogged down in serpentine caves or leave the player befuddled on how to progress. The story marches forward at a quick clip and players who conquer the reasonably sized dungeons are often rewarded with enjoyable new plot reveals, settings and character growth.

Combat in FFIV adds an interesting wrinkle known as the Active-Time Battle system. You'll still choose your attacks from a menu, but instead of taking turns in a set manner, your character can only act once their meter fills up (and enemies have the same restrictions, with an invisible meter). Ultimately, it still plays similarly to strictly turn-based combat, but adds a little extra bit of tension to the proceedings. Not only did this help Final Fantasy set itself apart further from Dragon Quest, but it ended up becoming popular enough to be the series' standard for the next four games afterward.

The Pixel Remaster additions are similar here to the other games in the set, allowing players to adjust random battles, the rate of Exp/Gil, and being able to run automatically. You can also choose the original soundtrack or the new one, and there's no wrong answer here — FFIV has one of the finest OSTs in the series, and the new renditions are largely excellent. The visuals are less of a leap over the NES remakes and have the unfortunate side effect of losing their identity a bit if you play all these games in succession, but on their own they're a nice bump up from the original.

Ultimately, Final Fantasy IV holds up well and remains just as fun to play today as it was upon its initial release. This is one of gaming's defining RPGs, and one of the few that later received direct storyline sequel content in the form of Final Fantasy IV: The After Years. (Maybe it'll come to the Switch next?)

If you're brand-new to the series or the genre and have always wanted to see what the fuss was about, I'd definitely recommend this as an entry point. (And then jump straight into VI!) — **MATTHEW T.**

9.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: SQUARE ENIX RATING: E10+

The Adventure of Butz

FINAL FANTASY V PIXEL REMASTER

YOU'D THINK WITH Final Fantasy VI being one of my favorite games that I'd have played V by now, but thus is the never-ending backlog, friends.

One hesitation I've had is finding the right version. The 16-bit original version wasn't translated until it came to PS1 in the West (and it also added fabulous FMVs). A GBA version and a generally maligned mobile version had even more changes. I played around with each of those past options a bit before diving into this latest one, and the most obvious change is the visuals.

I've always found the juxtaposition of modernized backgrounds with pixel sprites dissatisfying. It's better in a setting like Octopath Traveler or Triangle Strategy, where the character details have more attention and atmospherics play a role in the visuals. This approach seems more like wallpapering to me – but the remaster does allow a jump back to original visuals and sound. While the Yoshitaka Amano character portraits, extra dungeons and jobs from old versions are missed, this edition and its beautifully arranged music expertly walks the line between too much and too little modernization.

FFV is closer to FFIV in terms of series progression, as FFVI is the masterpiece that all of these early games built to. FFV's main claim to fame is its Job system, and it's thrown at players with very little explanation, with the game throwing jobs at you like candy. Each character can be any job, so it's really a balance of what skills you need to topple a foe. Once comfortable with one set of jobs, the game may flatten you with a boss, so trial and error is generally the way the game is played. Testing the plethora of jobs did end up being fun; I'll never underestimate a Geomancer again!

While the game would be very grind-heavy, the Pixel Remasters have the ability to shut off random encounters. This ultimately hurts you as some battles are unskippable, so bumping up the gold and XP gained from each battle is a better approach to speed things up.

The narrative tracks to most of the early games: the world is threatened by a malevolent force, monsters are running amok, townspeople recognize your party as heroes but still gouge you for the goods you need to stop the big bad. In this one, meteors land that actually turn out to be pandimensional spacecrafts. Exdeath – whose parents knew he would be a bad guy and named him accordingly – is destroying crystals to disrupt things and feed into his megalomaniacal desires. The four chosen heroes band together to save all worlds affected by Exdeath's schemes. Bartz and Lenna are pretty flat as main characters, and Galuf just has amnesia, but is actually from the other world. Faris is the most interesting character as she bounces between being a male pirate captain to revealing she's actually Lenna's sister. The dialogue on all this leaves much to be desired, but at least it's a better translation than most other versions. (Especially the names. Bartz was originally called "Butz" in Japan – maybe that's why it didn't come to America at first!)

Playing FFV is like returning to your hometown and seeing a friend who's had a facelift. It's missing a few old extras, but this is still an excellent way to experience a classic with a bumpy past. **– BRETT**

8.5

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: SQUARE ENIX RATING: T

The 16-Bit Masterpiece

FINAL FANTASY VI PIXEL REMASTER

FOR SEVERAL YEARS, the only way to play Final Fantasy VI with its updated Thomas Slattery translation was either to find FFVI Advance for the Game Boy Advance (a tall order) or play the mobile or Steam ports — which turned our favorite characters into pastel marshmallow people. Now, with the long-awaited Pixel Remaster collection finally here on Switch, it's time to rediscover one of the greatest RPGs of all time!

Taking place in a quasi-steampunk world, FFVI centers on the conflict between a heroic group of rebels and a powerful empire that has harnessed the long-forgotten power of magic. Each playable character has their own story arc and special skill (some of them more gimmicky than others) but all of them are united in their fight against Kefka, one of the most iconic video game villains ever.

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: SQUARE ENIX RATING: T

Right off the bat, there's a whole bunch of extra content, like the art gallery and a music player. The gameplay itself has gotten a bunch of QOL updates that can be toggled from the menus, such as always-on sprint, and an interactive world map. There are also options to customize leveling and monster encounters in the main menu, for those who want to streamline their experience.

The graphics have been faithfully recreated from their original SNES versions, with some of the character sprites getting complete makeovers. (Relm looks more like her character portrait than Little Red Riding Hood, for example).

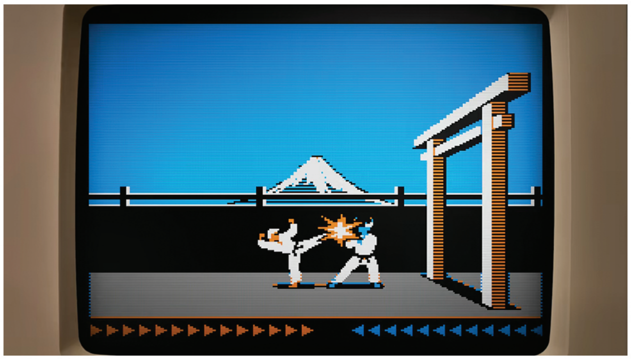
Finally, there are some welcome changes in battle. Sabin's Blitz techniques now have a diagram of button presses to follow that pops up on-screen, and Cyan's Bushido skills no longer have the painfully long charge times from previous versions.

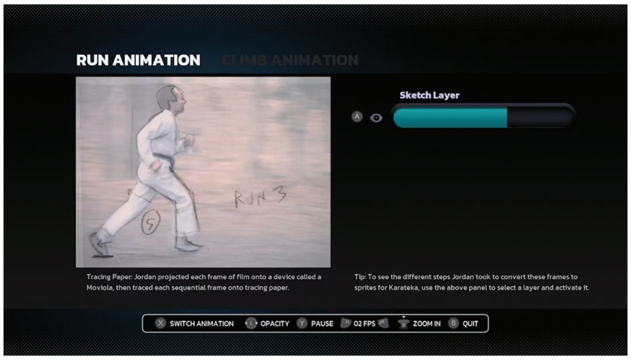
Even with all these new graphical and QOL updates, there is one upgrade that stands above the rest: the music. The freshly remastered soundtrack has been reorchestrated under the supervision of Nobuo Uematsu, and all sorts of little flourishes and callbacks have been added that weren't there before. Also, you can choose between it and the original SNES soundtrack! Out of the new tracks, my favorites were the theme of Narshe (featuring some soulful saxophones) and the updated versions of Techno de Chocobo and the Veldt theme. There are a few that don't sound too far removed from how they originally sounded on the SNES, but I didn't like how radically different Fanatic's Tower was from its original rendition.

There was only one part of the remaster I truly disliked, though, and that, unfortunately, was the opera sequence. The remastered music is spectacular, and the voice-acted singing is a great addition, but the set design for where Celes sings her aria, which is rendered in HD-2D style, reminds me way too much of the big castles from Super Mario Bros. to be emotionally impactful. True, this is a climactic scene, but there are so many ways it could've been made prettier. And for those wondering, it is the only HD-2D scene in the game — I'm surprised that some of the more climactic moments did not get the same treatment.

If there's one title out of the Pixel Remaster collection that is worth your time and money, it's this one. It's perfect for those who want to rediscover a classic with added modern conveniences, and for those who want to experience it for the first time! **— REBECCA**

8.5





Introducing the Gold Master Series!

THE MAKING OF KARATEKA

LAST YEAR, DIGITAL ECLIPSE released Atari 50: The Anniversary Celebration, which approached the concept of a classic game compilation in a rather novel way. Instead of making the games themselves the focus, the developers took what would normally be presented as bonus features and put them center stage, turning the entire experience into a playable documentary. The result was a spectacular success, and serves as the basis for their newest initiative, the Gold Master Series.

This series takes the interactive timeline concept established in Atari 50 and applies it to just one title at a time, in an effort to provide a deep dive into the history of a specific game. The first entry in this new series is centered around the 1984 Apple II classic, Karateka, a game with far more historical significance than some may realize, even beyond its direct connection to the Prince of Persia franchise.

The Making of Karateka tells the story of the game's creator, Jordan Mechner, and details the process of not only how the Karateka game was made, but also the inspirations behind it. Everything from the movies Jordan watched to the karate classes he took is laid out here in exceptional detail, including design documents, playable prototypes, correspondences with publishers and a number of interviews. Digital Eclipse got to talk with the game's composer (who also happens to be Jordan's father), industry figures who were influenced by their work like the lead designer of Ultima Online and the co-creator of Mortal Kombat, and, of course, Jordan Mechner himself.

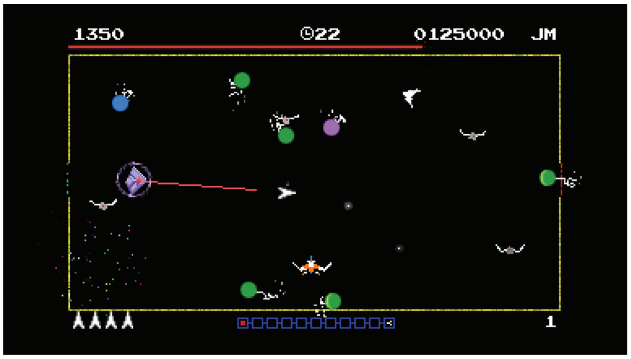
For as well put together as this affair is, though, I don't really find Karateka to be all that much fun to play. It's fascinating for sure, and there is a degree of fun to be had in discovering what the game pioneered — but for all the groundbreaking it did, playing it for the first time in 2023 isn't really all that enjoyable. But that makes how entertaining I found The Making of Karateka to be all the more impressive!

Karateka is a slow, methodical game that was arguably a little too ambitious for the meager hardware it was created for. Fortunately, Digital Eclipse has accounted for this brilliantly by allowing you to watch the game play itself if you choose — and they also went so far as to create Karateka Remastered, which successfully recreates Mechner's original vision with the power of modern hardware behind it. There's even similar treatment given to Mechner's earlier game (which is also included in this package), called Deathbounce: Rebounded. Both of these remastered games are really quite fun, especially after spending time with their various histories and early incarnations.

The Making of Karateka is a wonderful experience for anyone interested in video game history. I would have liked to see a larger pool of interview subjects, and it would have been nice to be able to save my place on the timeline instead of having to scroll back through the whole thing after taking a break, but otherwise, this is as comprehensive a video game retrospective as anyone could possibly hope for, wrapped up in a perfect presentation. The Gold Master Series is off to a strong start, and I can't wait to see which game is next! — **KRIS**

9.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: DIGITAL ECLIPSE RATING: T



In the Eye of the Storm

VAMPIRE SURVIVORS

IT MAY NOT look like much, but under Vampire Survivors' simple surface lies a game that's so addictive, so packed with secrets and so undeniably fun to play that it's hard to believe it only costs five bucks.

Vampire Survivors struck it big when it landed on Xbox and PC platforms late last year. This surprising little gem even managed to make it onto several Game of the Year lists, going toe to toe with (and sometimes even beating) the likes of Elden Ring, Kirby and the Forgotten Land and Xenoblade Chronicles 3. Coinciding with the game's latest free update, this surprising cult hit has landed on Switch in exquisite form. But what exactly is Vampire Survivors?

Well, you're a one-man army. You play as a single character tasked with surviving for up to 30 minutes against a seemingly unbeatable horde of enemies. I say "seemingly" because once you get the hang of things, it doesn't take long for you to become an unstoppable onslaught of death, easily capable of felling literally hundreds of enemies in the merest of moments! They should be the ones scared of you!

The gameplay itself can seem like pure insanity, but it's actually a very controlled chaos that takes a surprising amount of skill to manage. All weapons fire automatically, so the only thing you're actually responsible for is moving your character around. As you play, defeated enemies drop gems that give you experience points. Every time you level up, you're granted the choice to either get a new weapon (the bulk of which are hilariously shameless Castlevania references), a passive item or a power-up to your existing loadout. Blindly leveling up your weapons can be a good time, but the real fun lies in discovering which weapon and item combos can yield evolutions, which increase your destructive potential exponentially.

Periodically, boss characters will show up as well. Defeat one of them and you'll be treated to a treasure chest that will power up anywhere between one and five of your items at the same time, accompanied by the most over-the-top casino-style light show and catchy jingle imaginable. Because yes, while on the surface Vampire Survivors seems like a somewhat somber affair, it's actually completely goofy, and refuses to take itself even vaguely seriously.

This is a game that regularly breaks the fourth wall, allows you to gain the ability to throw cats and garbage around, lets you play as a tree and features a complete lack of actual vampires. (Which is to say nothing of the unlockable bestiary that gives legitimately hysterical backstories to nearly every monster found in the game.)

The sheer breadth of content here is astounding. There's a nearly bottomless well of weapons, items, stages and more to unlock. Every time you think you've seen it all, the game throws something new at you. There's even a way to skirt the 30-minute time limit by killing Death himself! (Well, *one* version of Death.)

I honestly can't believe how good Vampire Survivors is. Even its soundtrack is spectacular! The new multiplayer mode is a delightful slice of lunacy, and the optional DLC brings even more stages, secrets and weapons to the table. It can get a bit repetitive, but don't be fooled by its simple exterior – it's well deserving of every ounce of praise it's gotten and more.

This may very well be the best five-dollar investment you can make in the eShop. Don't miss it! **– KRIS**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: PONCLE RATING: T

9.5

Thou Shalt Not Bear False Witness

POKÉMON SCARLET & VIOLET

THE HIDDEN TREASURE OF AREA ZERO, PART 1: THE TEAL MASK

WELL, I GUESS I'm a liar now.

Pokémon is a series that's always prioritized choice. Setting out on each new adventure, you first have to choose which of three starters will accompany you. You choose which other monsters will fill out the rest of your team after that. You choose which moves they'll have, which items they'll hold, whether or not to evolve them and when . . . I mean, come on, Ash Ketchum's catchphrase was "I choose you!" for 25 years!

So it's really offputting to me that the stories in these games are so painfully straightforward – there's no choice in them at all. You just have to go through the motions, and the emotions, that have already been preselected for you.

DLC PUBLISHERS: NINTENDO & THE POKÉMON COMPANY
DEVELOPER: GAME FREAK RATING: E

And in The Teal Mask, the game just decides to make you a liar.

For this first of two parts of DLC for Pokémon Scarlet & Violet, your character flies away from the Paldea region to land in distant Kitakami – a new explorable area inspired by rural Japan. Once there, you meet two Blueberry Academy students who grew up in the local village: Carmine and Kieran. You also learn about the local legend: How, ages ago, a rampaging ogre attacked the village, but was driven off by the selfless sacrifice of the "Loyal Three" Pokémon. Kitakami culture has evolved to revere this trio, while reviling the infamous ogre and scaring children with warnings not to go wandering outside alone, lest the ogre appear again and attack them!

Kieran's not convinced. He loves the ogre, actually, and thinks all the other townsfolk are wrong to hold a negative opinion of it. And . . . he's right. The truth comes out that the local legend does have the facts reversed: The "Loyal Three" of Okidogi, Munkidori and Fezandipiti were really the villains, while the ogre, a.k.a. Ogerpon, is actually kind.

You discover this firsthand when you meet Ogerpon in person, along with Carmine. But now here comes the part that just puts a bad taste in my mouth: Carmine forces you to lie to Kieran and say you didn't see the ogre. Here's this happy-go-lucky boy who is the world's #1 Ogerpon fan, and you aren't given any option to celebrate your sighting with him, or to go with him to chase after it when it runs away. You just have to press A to advance the predetermined dialogue, all of which gaslights the poor kid. "To spare his feelings."

It gets worse. Turns out Carmine and Kieran's Grandpa has always known to truth about Ogerpon, but he also forces you not to reveal it to Kieran. He wouldn't want to upset the villagers' long-held belief that the "Loyal Three" were good guys, you see. And then, for the final straw, the story culminates in a battle against Kieran that you're, of course, forced to win. So that you can then capture Ogerpon yourself and fly back home to Paldea, leaving this traumatized child to wallow in psychological misery.

Honestly, The Teal Mask forces you to be a villain. You're just a random stranger visiting from another country, and you spend a few days in Kitakami, running around stealing away all their Legendary Pokémon, and then peacing out back where you came from. And the game is *maybe* going to follow up on the insanity of that with more of a Kieran story arc in the next DLC part, but I really just didn't care for it at all.

7.0

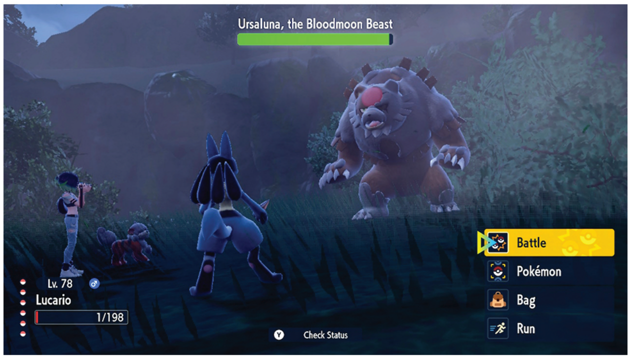
Not all of The Teal Mask is about torturing an innocent kid, thankfully. There's another new character named Perrin who challenges you to catch and catalog over 150 Pokémon in the Kitakami Dex – a reasonable goal. After you achieve it, she invites you to join her on a photography expedition, which activates a unique bit of gameplay where you sneak around a forest at night and snap pictures of Pokémon. It's nowhere near as involved or interesting as Pokémon Snap, but it is a nice diversion and it culminates in a battle against an all-new form of Ursaluna, which was unexpected but welcome. (Perhaps Perrin could star in a New Pokémon Snap sequel in the future? The online fandom loves her already.)

Other than the new Ursaluna and the four Legendaries that star in the main story, there are only three other new Pokémon to be found in this new land: Dipplin, a third evolution of Applin that looks like a candy apple, as well as Poltchageist and Sinistcha, some alternate takes on Sinistea and Polteageist based on matcha tea. Three . . . is not a lot.

I was hoping for at least one or two more new 'mons to pop up and make the quest more interesting, but alas, there are no more. Not until the next DLC.

I did try to help the fun factor of The Teal Mask along a bit by setting my own limits going in. Rather than rolling through with my Champions of Paldea team of all-stars, I boxed my whole Violet squad and flew off to Kitakami with only a lone Lucario. Doing this, and rebuilding a team using only the Pokémon found in the wilds locally, made the adventure a lot more challenging and more fun. I even tried not to ride Miraidon much – walking everywhere extended the journey, and it also helped minimize the still-glaring graphical problems that plague these games to this day. (If you had hope that the release of this DLC would improve the games' visual performance, you can just let those hopes die.)

I enjoyed playing The Teal Mask for the parts that weren't the main story. Since taking part in that story forces you to repeatedly lie to a kid without any good reason, it left me feeling like a bad person. **– LUCAS**



SECOND OPINION

CARTER'S KITAKAMI QUEST

I'M HAPPY TO report that the first part of the Scarlet & Violet DLC is a lot better than Sword & Shield's!

First, let's talk about new Pokémon. While the Isle of Armor had just Kubfu and Urshifu, in Kitakami you can get seven new Pokémon, two of which are new type combos! Munkidori is Poison/Psychic, and Fezandipiti is Poison/Fairy, and while those were first seen as Galarian Slowbro and Galarian Weezing, it's official now. (That bumps the unused type combo list to 17; or nine if you count all the different forms.)

Second, while it's easy to tell that Kitakami is far from Paldea, we can tell from several clues that it is somewhere near the Sinnoh region. One, the story is based on a Japanese folktale. (Or is it?) The Sinnoh region is in Japan, so it makes sense. Two, most 'mons found there can be caught in Sinnoh. You can even get one of the three Sinnoh starters from an egg! And three, Basculegion, Ursaluna and Hisuian Growlithe can be acquired. (But then there's Stantler and no Wyrdeer? Now I'm confused.)

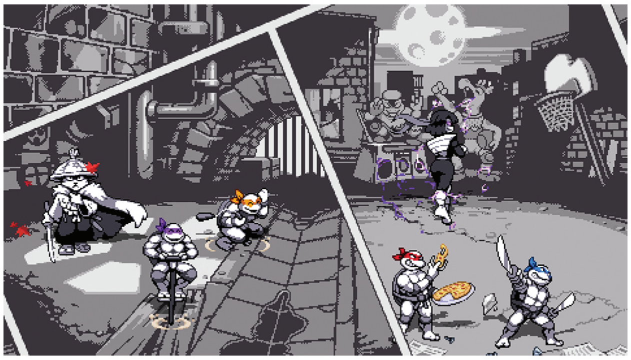
Third, the new characters are pretty good too! Briar, a teacher at Blueberry Academy, lets you know more about Part 2; the Caretaker lets you stay at the Community Center; and Carmine and Kieran are a pair of siblings that are often embarrassed by each other.

Here's an example: "You want to pair up with one of us poor, lonely, Blueberry Academy students? Hey, Kiki! Why don't you pair up with Carter?" "Hey – wait, no!" "C'mon, it'll be fine! Just do it!" "Hey – wait – no – but – aw man . . . "

Fourth and final, the landscape. There are forests, lakes, fields and mountains to explore. My favorite part was the Level 100 Magikarp in the little pond area in the Fellhorn Gorge. (I'm not kidding! Find it yourself!) If you go to Kitakami after beating the main game, not many 'mons there will be less than Level 55. Before: You'll encounter some Level 9s, sure, but you could still find a Level 55 Snorlax.

I've much enjoyed exploring Kitakami, and now my second-favorite game has my favorite DLC! **– CARTER**

9.5



Turtle Power in Parallel Dimensions!

TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES: SHREDDER'S REVENGE – DIMENSION SHELLSHOCK

THERE'S NO QUESTION that Shredder's Revenge is the proper successor to Konami's TMNT arcade brawlers, oozing with all the attention to finer details that later Turtles games lacked. But Shredder's Revenge has one ninja tool in its arsenal that the classics could never wield: downloadable content!

Dimension Shellshock is a seemingly modest expansion at first glance, adding not a new Story campaign but a Survival mode that serves as both a training arena for fresh recruits and a proving ground for warriors who've already recycled ol' Tin Grin in the main adventure. But just as the base game is chockfull of references to the '87 TV series and infused with clever gameplay mechanics that enrich the combat, so too is this trek across the Turtleverse. From the monochrome panels of Mirage Comics to the 8-bit streets of an NES-inspired New York, you'll battle through Foot, Rock and Triceraton soldiers to collect enough Dimensional Crystal shards to advance to the next level. (And as you do, be sure to keep an eye out for Mona Lisa, Cudley the Cowlick and other deep cuts from the series' extended cast hanging out in the backgrounds!)

In rogue-lite fashion, you have but one life to give before you're ejected back to the sewers, but as you collect Dimension Crystals, you're able to permanently extend your health bar, gain an additional life and even skip ahead to more difficult dimensions. Clearing a wave of enemies results in a choice between two rewards, forcing you to weigh their cost/benefits. Sometimes you'll be offered a perk that imposes a temporary restriction for a promised gain, like dealing extra damage for several rounds at the cost of halving your defense. Or maybe you'll get a Mutagen canister that transforms you into Bebop, Rocksteady or Shredder! Though their abilities are limited compared to those of the rest of the playable squad, their inclusion further elevates the chaotic possibilities in a run.

As for full playable characters, we can't gloss over the two new additions, whose appearances are fitting given the DLC's trans-dimensional theme. First up is Karai, high-ranking Foot Clan member and frenemy of the Turtles who, despite her importance in the greater franchise, never actually showed up in the original cartoon. Her design here is modeled after her 2003 series look, while her moveset draws heavily from her Tournament Fighters incarnation.

Then there's Miyamoto Usagi, the rabbit ronin from a completely separate comic who has crossed over into TMNT media so often that he might as well be official. Unlike fellow katana user Leo, who incorporates kicks and wild swings in his repertoire, Usagi only attacks with his blade using deliberate strikes. These newcomers easily offer the best playstyles among the entire roster, so you'll be pleased to know they can be used in Story mode as well.

I do lament Survival's lackluster enemy pool, drawn directly from the main campaign with a paltry number of new Foot variants. Even simple cosmetic tweaks informed by the current dimension – black-and-white Foot in Mirage, pixelated Foot in 8-Bit Battleground, samurai armor-clad Foot in Edo – would've added welcome visual variety. (The playable heroes do get dozens of new skins featuring alternate colors, though.) Still, none of that negatively impacts Dimension Shellshock's "just one more run" quality, which radically enhances an already radical base package. **– TONY**

DLC PUBLISHER: DOTEMU
DEVELOPER: TRIBUTE GAMES
RATING: E10+

9.0

BY JOHN-CHARLES HOLMES

THE ABCs OF RPGs

Let's get back to basics. It was 27 years ago when Nintendo and Square presented the original SNES version of Super Mario RPG, a game that served as a gateway for millions of new players to discover the role-playing genre for the first time. Now, with the imminent release of Super Mario RPG's new Switch remake, an all-new generation will have their chance to take their first steps in RPGs as well! In support of that goal, we present this beginner-friendly guide to the genre. Because you've got to know the fundamentals!

BY MAGGIE JONES LUTEY, BRETT MARTIN, TONY PONCE, KRIS RANDAZZO, REBECCA RUDRANATH & LUCAS M. THOMAS

A IS FOR ADVENTURING!

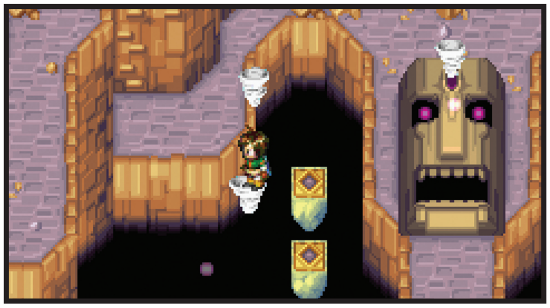
The heart of role-playing games is having an epic adventure! So many of the great games in this genre present players with heroes who come from humble beginnings or small villages, and then they get to set out and explore the great big world that lies beyond the boundaries of everything they've known before. Things usually start easy at first, as you just get your feet wet stepping slightly out into the wild – but the further from home you travel, the more the reality of having left comfort and safety behind will come into focus. Adventuring isn't easy! But it is rewarding. Pushing through adversity, crossing over each new bridge or climbing to the top of each new mountain, you'll be met with sights and scenes that make every bit of hardship worth it. In the end, you may even get to come home again – but not as the same person. You'll be fundamentally changed from having completed your epic adventure!

B IS FOR BATTLING!

That adversity that opposes your adventuring? Much of it arrives in the form of fights! Role-playing games are filled with battles, as enemies appear and try to do their very best to halt your progress and send your heroes straight to the Game Over screen. (Or at least running back to the nearest health-restoring inn or save point to take a break and collect yourself!) Battles are always different in every RPG, but some basics undergird nearly every unique interpretation: They boil down to preparation and execution. Preparation means getting your characters ready for a fight before the fight even begins: finding or buying equipment to boost their stats, investing time in any skill trees the game may have to activate further buffs or special techniques and familiarizing yourself with everything your heroes can and can't do. After that, it's all execution: Using your available weapons, skills and items wisely in order to win!

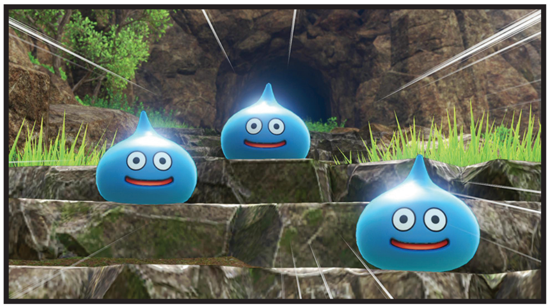
C IS FOR CUTSCENES!

RPGs often have A LOT going on, and one way they bring clarity is with their use of cutscenes. They press pause on current gameplay and provide a sequence that players can view without much (or any) interaction. It could be as simple as a new character being introduced or showing an overview of an area. However, as technology has improved over the years, cutscenes have followed suit and become an integral part of RPGs. They're often either pre-rendered (which features higher quality visuals than the game itself) or they take place using the game's engine in real time. Cutscenes serve many purposes. They can set the tone in various settings, progress the narrative, reveal events unseen by the main characters and foster connections among the cast. Most of all, cutscenes encompass the most emotionally gripping, meaningful moments these games have to offer and have the potential to stick with us for years to come.



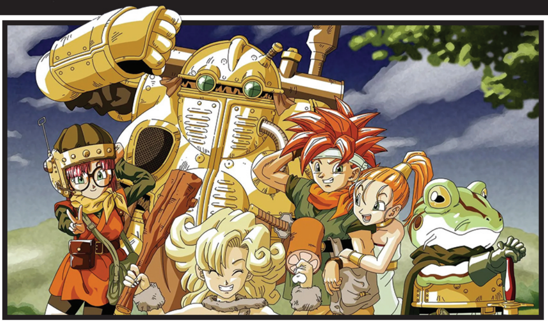
D IS FOR DUNGEONS!

What's life without a little challenge? It's time to stray away from the safe haven of The First Town and put all that shopping and preparation to the test! And as the headlining word in the RPG grandfather Dungeons & Dragons implies, dungeons are a pretty crucial part of the RPG experience! These sprawling tests of skill and resources take many forms, from the serpentine labyrinths of the oldest Final Fantasys and Dragon Quests to the Zelda-inspired puzzles interspersed throughout games like Golden Sun and Lufia II. Be sure to conserve your MP and items smartly or you'll be returning to town (in a casket or otherwise)! Dungeons will often crescendo to a tussle against some horrible boss beastie, but if you prevail, you can hold your head high and head home to nurse your wounds and spend that pouch full of coinage acquired from all the battling – which you can then use to arm yourself for the next dungeon!



E IS FOR ENEMIES!

It wouldn't be much of a journey without conflict, and so enemies, no matter the form, are crucial to the RPG formula. They come in all shapes, sizes and power levels. They range from adorable (like Dragon Quest's Slimes) to grotesque (like Xenoblade Chronicles 3's Moebius or Dragon Age Origins' Broodmother). Either way, enemies represent a barrier for your party to get through, and they also offer important feedback. As you slice and blast through trash mobs, mid-bosses and superbosses, they are the litmus test to your current strength level and combat abilities. They reveal even the smallest of weaknesses in your arsenal, and they provide crucial materials, money and experience throughout your journey. Enemies also reveal a glimpse of the other side of the conflict. RPG narratives aren't always black and white, and you can often only find out the whole truth of a tale by confronting those who oppose you!



F IS FOR FRIENDS!

Maybe the real treasure *is* the friends we made along the way? In RPGs, that's often the case, and they're all the better for it. Many games set up their hero with an insurmountable task: protecting their kingdom from certain destruction, rescuing a loved one from an evil plot or saving their world from a corrupt system. It would be impossible alone, and so our heroes must find companions to fight alongside them. They come in many forms, like the loyal best friend, the wisecracking mentor and the fierce rival-turned-ally. Some will join you on the battlefield! Others will cheer you on from the sidelines. Their roles in the story grow and change alongside the main character, and you'll often have entire questlines devoted to learning more about the friends by your side. RPGs often show how unlikely groups can band together to do extraordinary things: a reminder that different perspectives and experiences hold the key to victory!

G IS FOR GOLD!

Gold. GP. Gil. Zenny. Whatever it's called, there's no denying that cash rules everything around you (dollar dollar bill, y'all). Need to make a supply run? Catch some Zs at an inn? Retire your tattered leather garments for a sick Mythril armor set? Not without a hefty amount of green in your pocket, and I'm not talking the Gysahl kind! Thankfully, your solvency woes can be cured by a spot of monster hunting, since every Slime, Orc and Dire Rat inexplicably carries pocket change. Doesn't sound too heroic when you consider that you and your party are essentially muggers, terrorizing mythical creatures simply minding their business. Though EarthBound's novel payout method is a lot less ethically bankrupt: Ness' bank balance grows not from robbing enemies blind but from regular deposits from a workaholic father, financing his son's adventures from afar. Money's a suitable substitute for paternal affection, I suppose!

H IS FOR HIT POINTS!

At the start of a new workout program, you're guaranteed to become winded before completing your warm-ups. Stick to a routine, though, and marvel as your stamina extends far beyond what it once was! If only you could assign a value to your real-world vigor, so that you may measure your durability against your friends at a simple glance? RPGs provide us with just such a metric in the form of Health Points – perhaps the most significant attribute in any ally or even enemy's stat profile. I mean, what better way to determine a monster's threat level than with a number that represents how much damage it can tank? That early-game boss with 1,000 HP? A kitten compared to the regular grunts with five times that amount fought later in the story! And what of characters like the War Lady above, from Disgaea 6, with 77,878,632,899,759,418,378 HP!? It's good to have long-term fitness goals, but set your sights a little lower than that!

I IS FOR INVENTORY!

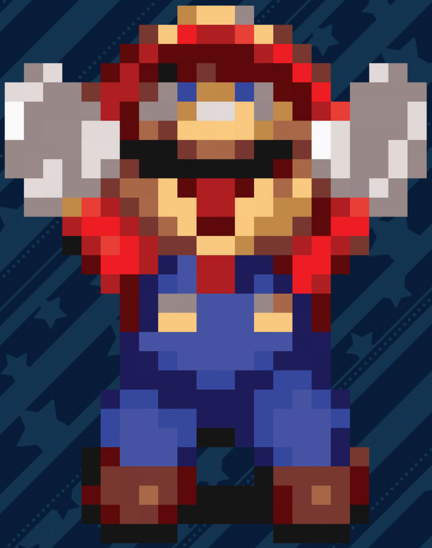
Are you the type to gather 99 Elixirs and then forget to ever use them? Same. Inventory management is important in RPGs. Some, like Final Fantasy, have infinite space so you can hold all of your past weapons and armor along with all the other stuff. Other games, like EarthBound or Golden Sun, have limited item slots per character, so not only do you need the right character holding the right stuff, but you also need to leave an open slot to grab chests along the way. It can be nerve-racking! The latter is obviously more realistic, as imagining characters lugging around all of the items they're supposedly holding in the former is laughable. Organization is also important, and most games have a means of auto-organizing items based on most-used, equipment or item type. Some games experiment with inventory, giving you limited options in battle with deck-building, while others require you to physically place items in storage!

J IS FOR JOBS!

Many traditional RPGs lock you into a character class – Mage, Thief, Fighter, etc. – but what if you could change all that as easily as changing equipment? Commonly called "Jobs," systems like these allow a character to temporarily assume a different character class, with access to unique skills that will carry over as your character levels up. Sometimes, there are even secret Jobs that grant you even *more* powerful skills! Depending on the type of RPG you're playing, the types of Jobs available vary – while all of these have their standard fantasy class fighting and magic choices available, Octopath Traveler includes the non-traditional Merchant and Dancer, the Bravely Default series includes the unorthodox Vampire, Pâtissier and Catmancer, and Fantasy Life has craftsmanship jobs such as Tailor and Cook. Who knew that being able to sauté potatoes would unlock a fire spell with the power to one-hit KO a boss?

K IS FOR KEY ITEMS!

In many RPGs, there's usually one page in the Inventory reserved for Key Items (like that one drawer in your office or kitchen that holds everything). Many times, they are items that will allow characters to perform essential skills, such as the many communications devices used in the Pokémon series. Sometimes they're important personal mementos that have a hidden side to them, like Marle's pendant in Chrono Trigger, or they might just be items picked up during the story that serve as flavor or plot exposition, like discarded letters, hastily scribbled passwords on scraps of paper or diaries filled with secrets about plots and motivations. And sometimes Key Items are actual keys! Regardless of what it is, a seemingly useless item you picked up at the start of your quest may end up being just the thing you need to complete it. The best thing about Key Items is that there's no way you can accidentally sell them or throw them out – unlike real life!



L IS FOR LEVELING UP!

One of the defining features of RPGs is enhancing and upgrading your character – or leveling up! In earlier RPGs, requiring players to gain levels through grinding (battling enemies for XP) was a means of padding the play time to intrinsically add value to the game and justify its purchase price. Some action games could be beaten in a matter of hours, but RPG players may not even finish the first chapter in that time! Most RPGs have stats that tell the player how much XP is needed to gain a level. Some games refill HP and MP upon level gain, while others do not. Stat boosts are integrated into each level, and often characters will learn new skills or have options on skill trees to further upgrade. Good RPGs today respect the player's time by balancing grinding in such a way that simply traversing an area and battling the enemies there will be enough to progress – but becoming too powerful too quickly can also ruin a game.

M IS FOR MAGIC SPELLS!

Why simply slash at your foes with a sword or send puny arrows sailing their way when you could conjure a force of pure elemental might to destroy them instead? Magic spells have been a part of RPGs from the genre's earliest days, back when the first Dragon Quest hero was casting the likes of "Hurtmore" to do simple damage to his enemies. Spells have gotten a lot more interesting since then, with flashy names and frequently gorgeous visual effects popping off across the screen as soon as you choose to use them! Common magical techniques you'll see across several RPGs include fire spells to burn enemies to a crisp, ice spells to freeze them in place and poison spells to inflict ongoing damage as the battle continues. That's just the offensive side of the spectrum, though! Defensive spells can counter enemies' attacks, and healing spells, of course, can restore lost HP to keep your heroes feeling fighting fit!

N IS FOR NPCs!

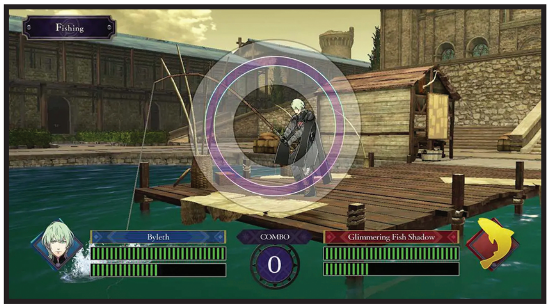
RPGs are known for vast settings, but they'd feel pretty empty without the presence of characters to bring them to life! Enter: NPCs (a.k.a. non-playable characters). By definition, you can't control them, and that's the beauty of it. NPCs have their own routines, goals and lives, and we can view as much or as little as we'd like of their journeys. All NPCs are not created equal! We've all played games where NPC design and writing leave much to be desired, but I think there are just as many examples of memorable ones. Take The Gatekeeper from Fire Emblem: Three Houses: What he lacks in observation ("Nothing to report, professor!"), he makes up for in enthusiasm. Or Anton from the Trails series: His quest for true love was six games in the making! Whether you interact with them once or a hundred times, NPCs show what it's like for people in these worlds who aren't the Chosen Ones, and that makes them so relatable and valuable.

O IS FOR OSTs!

A good OST (original soundtrack) can make or break a game. This is especially true for RPGs, as so much of their tone is determined by sound. Story-driven games, especially older ones that don't feature voice acting, rely heavily on their soundtracks to convey emotions during long, text-heavy scenes. Music lets you know if a town is peaceful, or if there's something sinister just under the surface. Music tells you if the battle sequence you just engaged in is merely a regular enemy encounter, or something more. But most importantly, music plays a significant role in making a vast journey not feel tedious. The right song can maintain a sense of intensity, and prevent extra long boss battles from getting stale. Music can ease the frustration of wandering around a map with no idea of where to go next! Whether the setting is sci-fi, fantasy or something else entirely, the OST is the magnificent glue that holds any good RPG together.

P IS FOR PARTY!

By "Party," we don't mean the post-battle celebration dance that your team does after a well-earned victory, but the team members themselves. It's dangerous to go alone, so gathering a well-balanced squad of heroes is paramount for success! RPGs pride themselves on strategy, so be sure to make the most of your teammates. Four beefy fighters may have worked in the old days, but going for balance is usually a good option here, such as a spell-slinging specialist, a beefy tank and a nimble thief. Some games even let you adjust your characters' skills and jobs on the fly! . . . But what's this? A sudden tragedy has befallen a beloved Mage? Your Ninja friend chose to hit the road? It's a new chapter and you're now a Merchant? Time to regroup and adjust your strategies! Whether you have control over your team makeup or not, make sure to always play to the strengths of the lineup and you'll be able to tackle any obstacle!



Q IS FOR QUESTS!

Getting distracted from the main quest in an RPG is often where the game shines the most . . . or where it falls into clichés. We would rather be riding a bear, raising a Chocobo, fishing for loot and fame or forging the best weapons than finding a lost item for an NPC, scouting specific monsters to grab 20 of its rare horns or escorting a weakling through a deadly area! Sidequests and optional dungeons either add to the time in a beloved game or become a tedious quasi-necessity to get goods in order to progress. The worst is when you have sidequests that are time-limited or missable in some way, as many like to keep that last save before the conclusion to go run around the world more. They're great when NPCs you've helped have a role in the final story or become good friends, or you gain a secret party member! Essentially, when sidequests are done well, it's grinding in disguise, but they can be hit or miss in terms of value.

R IS FOR REAL-TIME!

So we know that role-playing games are home to a bunch of battles, and we further know that those battles can be against just one foe or many enemies at once, with players in command of just one hero or many party members. But how does the action actually play out? Well, there's quite a bit of variety there as well, with at least three broad combat categories covering most of the greater genre. First up? Real-time combat! In these kinds of battle systems, players take direct command of their characters, controlling their moment-to-moment movement around each battlefield and pressing buttons on the controller to execute actions on the spot. That just reads like a really generic description of how tons of video games work, sure, but in RPGs having to use real reflexes to react to what's going on in a fight hasn't always been the norm – and still isn't! Real-time combat is still seen less frequently than other battle styles!

S IS FOR STRATEGY!

While a lot of the action in real-time combat RPGs involves proper placement of your heroes in relation to their foes – dodging out of the way of enemies' attacks, flanking them to target weak points and the like – there's another category of combat that prioritizes positioning far more: strategy RPGs! Games under the strategy RPG umbrella often have the words "tactics" in their titles to give players a heads-up to expect to find battles that most closely resemble a chess match. These games have you fielding whole teams of units, each with their own strengths, weaknesses and range of attack reach. Some characters, like archers, can safely snipe enemies from afar, and so can be placed several squares away on the grid-based battlefields; other allies have short-range swords or other melee weapons that they need to move in close to use. Still other are magic wielders, many of whom toss the usual rules out the window! Strategy is key!

T IS FOR TURN-BASED!

Finally, let's take a look at combat as if it were being played out in a tabletop RPG system. For example, combat in Dungeons & Dragons starts with an initiative roll, where all the players and the enemy party roll a d20 and add or subtract their bonuses to decide their turn in battle. When a battle begins, the turn order is decided by having the enemy or ally with the highest speed (or initiative) going first, with the others following in descending order. Video game RPG battles often work much in the same way, but it wasn't until the SNES era that Square's Active Time Battle refined the turn-based system, with a progress gauge for each combatant's turn and spells like Haste, Slow and Stop to affect how fast those gauges fill. Octopath Traveler goes a step further and puts the turn order right at the top of the screen, giving you a guide while you use skills to manipulate the turn order and take out some monsters before they can even hit you!

U IS FOR ULTROS!

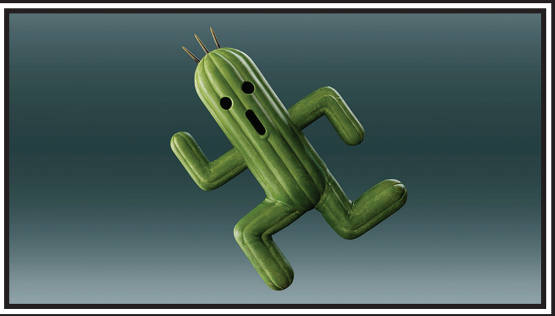
There's a time in every RPG when you roll your eyes at the screen and mutter, "Aw man, not *that* guy/*those* guys/*them*/*that* thing again!" Sometimes, they're disposable mooks, like Team Rocket and their endless supply of low-level Pokémon. Sometimes, they're a serious threat, like the Turks in Final Fantasy VII. And sometimes they're comic relief, like Ultros in Final Fantasy VI – a huge purple octopus who enjoys wreaking havoc on our heroes, including crashing an airship battle between the heroes and their attack on the imperial capital city of Vector! No matter what kind of recurring villain they are, it's always satisfying to defeat them, and even more satisfying to see them hit rock bottom. (Sometimes literally, like Ozzie in Chrono Trigger, who you defeat by sending him falling to his doom! You'd think he'd learn to not rely on so many trap doors!)

V IS FOR VILLAINS!

It's satisfying to finish a Super Mario Bros. game, sure, but everybody knows Bowser isn't all *that* bad. Ganondorf is more menacing in Tears of the Kingdom than he's ever been in the past, and yet fan discourse surrounding him most recently has focused on his hot new body! (Partly our fault.) RPGs, unlike other categories of video games, more consistently portray genuinely evil villains – just totally irredeemable murderers and maniacs who will never get an invite to appear in a cheerful kart racing spin-off after the credits roll! There are still ancillary antagonists like Ultros that play supporting roles or even provide comic relief, because these games don't want to oppress their players too much by having every foe you face be insanely sinister. But there is usually one truly Big Bad – one oppressive force that exists as such a purified embodiment of darkness that the heroes' ultimate victory for the light shines all the brighter!

W IS FOR WESTERN RPGs!

When we talk about RPGs, we're usually talking about the kinds of role-playing games that are made by Japanese developers like Nintendo, Square Enix and Nihon Falcom. They all have a kind of shared style tracing its history all the way back to the first Dragon Quest. At the same time, there is a whole other legacy of RPGs that established itself in the West, which merits special mention! Western RPGs, in the video game space, go all the way back to early '80s hits like Ultima and Wizardry. More recently we've seen the rise of series like Mass Effect and The Elder Scrolls developed by Western studios, as well as direct adaptations of the OG RPG itself, Dungeons & Dragons, in video games like Neverwinter Nights and Baldur's Gate. All role-playing games are in the same family ultimately, but Western RPGs tend to be more serious and look more realistic than the fanciful fare being created in Japan. You should try both styles!



X IS FOR XP!

Experience doesn't come cheap. If you hope to hone an existing skill or learn a new one, then you best put in the effort! However, just because there are no shortcuts to success in life doesn't mean you can't optimize the process. The same holds true in the RPG space, where Experience Points are the primary building blocks of character growth. You could grind against low-level hordes, but that's hours of playtime wasted on menial busywork. You gotta be more efficient! Seek out accessories that double or even triple your rate of XP acquisition. Study your in-game bestiary and take note of which creatures offer the highest XP rewards, then concentrate your hunting expeditions solely on their stomping grounds. Bust out the pad and pencil to draw up helpful charts, if you must! Such strategies may pit you against vicious terrors outside your comfort zone, but the time you save will be worth the blood, sweat and tears!

Y IS FOR YOU!

While most games have players assume a role in the experience, no genre allows you to be yourself more than RPGs. This concept looks different depending on the game. In Final Fantasy and Fire Emblem, it could be choosing your favorite combat skills or a party configuration that suits you best. Other RPGs burst at the seams when it comes to player choice, like Mass Effect: You can choose how your hero looks, what choices you'll make, who your allies are and even how your journey will end. In the midst of all these choices, though, is the effect that RPGs have on YOU. The stories, the characters, the choices – all have the potential to teach you about yourself. Do you empathize with these characters and their plight? Would you take the path of least resistance? Where do you see yourself reflected in this tale? No matter the experience, we have a profound impact on RPGs we play, and, in turn, they leave a lasting impact on us.

Z IS FOR ZEROMUS!

FOOLISH MAGAZINE READER!
YOU HAVE FLIPPED TOO FAR! ***NOW YOU MEET YOUR DOOM!!!!***

(whispering) Hey, don't let him hear us talking!

Zeromus here is a conveniently alphabet-ending example of one final aspect that almost all RPGs share: the final boss fight! To illustrate the fullest extent of your heroes' character growth and how far they've come since spending the first minutes of the game probably defeating Level 1 Rats, final boss encounters almost always pit your party against an epic, unimaginable evil who appears in some insanely intimidating screen-filling form. (And often transforms into even more grotesque forms as the battle rages on across multiple phases!) You'll have to muster all your strength to win . . . but you can do it! We believe in you!

BY LINDSEY LAYNE KING

SUPER MARIO RPG

Nintendo's revived the original entry-level role-playing game!

NOTHING CAN BEAT a bit of hands-on learning.

We've just presented our ABCs of RPGs article, and along with the many role-playing reviews and previews we've presented in this issue and 12 years' worth of past publications, any of you out there who've still never tried to play an RPG for yourself should have a fairly complete picture of what the genre is like. And yet, there's still really no substitute for actually picking up a controller and powering on one for yourself! You really need to have firsthand experience to fully understand the experience of, say, earning Experience Points.

Which is why Super Mario RPG was made in the first place!

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPERS: NINTENDO & SQUARE ENIX RELEASE: NOVEMBER 17, 2023 RATING: E

Back in the mid-'90s, Squaresoft was soaring on the success of several different SNES RPGs – it was a true golden age for the genre, and fans who got themselves plugged in early in that era got to fully enjoy a feast of masterpieces released one after another.

The problem, though? There just weren't that many people attending the banquet! For as much fun as the early RPG adopters were having, there were still millions of other video game fans out there who were too intimidated by the genre to try it – or too uneducated about its true appeal. Sure, there had been the big giveaway of free copies of Dragon Warrior to Nintendo Power subscribers several years earlier, and praise had been lavished on games like Final Fantasy, Chrono Trigger and Secret of Mana. And EarthBound had its famous "This game stinks!" ad campaign! But nothing was really connecting.

What RPGs really needed was a face that the casual audience knew. The genre needed an eye-catching entry point – one game that would be able to get the attention of every potential RPG enjoyer out there, to put them on a path of being willing to branch out and explore the genre!

So it was that, brilliantly, Super Mario RPG came into existence. Both Square and Nintendo came together to accomplish this joint mission of finally broadening the acceptance of RPGs as a whole – and, in the process, they just happened to make one more SNES masterpiece!

THE ROLE YOU'LL GET TO PLAY!
MARIO

It's-a him, back again!

Mario is the main character of Super Mario RPG, and retains that role throughout its entire adventure. He's the first playable character in your party, the only one you'll ever control in the platforming sequences and the only hero whose position in the fighting force of three is never usurped! While the other party members can rotate in and out of the active battle squad, Mario will always be present – so it's just up to you to decide which pair to partner him up with. Do you go Mario/Mallow/Geno to give both of the SMRPG-exclusive heroes extra time to shine? Or do you kick it with Mario/Bowser/Peach, the classic trinity of the Super Mario series? There are six different configurations to choose from!

Mario himself is a well-rounded fighter, using Hammers and Shells to knock some sense into his foes – and Jumps and Fireballs as well!

HYBRID GAMEPLAY

"Super Mario RPG" is as simple and straightforward a name as a video game could possibly have – some fictional equivalents would be things like "Castlevania Racing Game" or "The Legend of Zelda Puzzle Game" or "Mega Man Soccer." (. . . wait.) But! In this case, it's an entirely apt title, as the game eases players into its RPG parts by surrounding them with classic Super Mario platforming sequences.

Players take direct control of Mario and run him through obstacle courses filled with enemies, jumping over pits and bashing hovering boxes to grab the coins or other items that hide inside. Perfectly normal Mario fare!

. . . Just with a couple of twists.

First, the Super Mario platforming in this adventure isn't entirely *classic*, in that it all takes place from a totally untraditional point of view. Everything is isometric! All the environments are seen from an angle, in a "3/4 view" that used to be seen fairly frequently in earlier video game ages, but is an exceptionally rare visual choice for a game today. The isometric perspective is kind of a half-step between old, flat 2D sidescrolling and the fully 3D view that would begin to dominate Mario's games starting with the release of Super Mario 64 (later in the same calendar year, 1996), so Super Mario RPG's original release at the end of the SNES generation did feel appropriately transitional at the time. Seeing that viewpoint preserved for this remake is now just purely nostalgic!

The second twist is where the RPG side of the gameplay begins to enter into the equation: When Mario hops on top of an enemy in these platforming sequences (or makes any other kind of contact), he doesn't defeat them on the spot. He also isn't immediately damaged! Instead, players are instantly swept away to a separate screen, as Mario and his allies line up on one end of a self-contained arena and the enemy he touched (and often some of *its* allies) appear on the opposite side to oppose them. It's time for a battle!

GET YOUR TIMING JUST RIGHT

Basic battles are so much the heart of so many RPGs, and I feel like the simplified combat system presented in Super Mario RPG worked perfectly to support the game's goal of getting new people introduced to the genre. It's not too complicated! Whereas many Final Fantasy games or other RPGs of the same mid-'90s era could feel overwhelming in the options presented to their players – including huge laundry lists of different spells to cast, items to use or party members to recruit – this game kept all those things streamlined. There are only a few different special skills that each hero can learn. There are not too many different kinds of items to keep track of. And there are only five total party members, with only three of those active in fights at any one time! It's all pretty easy to understand.

Combat isn't *too* simplified, though. Battles remain interesting through interactivity – since you're not just choosing "Attack" from a menu and then sitting back to watch animations play out. You have to be an active participant in each assault by timing your button presses to do extra damage!

Timed button presses have become a staple in RPGs in the years since this game's original release, but this is the origin point of that mechanic. Press a button to start your attack. Press again at a key point – like the instant your weapon makes contact – to add some extra oomph. Easy! The same dynamic plays out on defense, too, as when enemies swoop in, you can lower or sometimes entirely negate the

A FUN-LOVING FROG *(REALLY? A FROG?)*

MALLOW

The first partner Mario will meet up with in his journey is this happy-go-lucky young fellow who's been raised by a family of frogs . . . and claims to be one himself. (Uh, sure kid. Have you looked in a mirror lately? You've got a distinct lack of green going on.)

Really, Mallow fills that classic RPG role of being a hero who suffers from amnesia, and his quest for self-discovery and seeking out his true identity will neatly overlap with Mario's adventure to save the Mushroom Kingdom, so the two of them decide to travel together. And while Mallow may look like a total cream puff, he really pulls his weight in battle with his ability to cast mighty magic spells!

From calling bolts of lightning down from the sky to summoning small clouds of healing rain, he's got a definite weather theme in place. When not conjuring, though, he can clap foes physically with clanging Cymbals!

A WARRIOR FROM THE STARS

GENO

The story of Super Mario RPG centers on an invasion of the Mushroom Kingdom by a group of weapon-themed warriors who call themselves "the Smithy Gang." They announce their arrival by plunging a massive sword straight into the center of Bowser's Castle – but, as that sword descends from the upper atmosphere, it also shatters the Star Road on its way down! With it broken, no one's wishes can be granted – so a lone Star Warrior makes his own descent to fight to restore the Road!

Geno is the third party member, and while he looks like a wooden doll, his real self is the star spirit living inside that borrowed body. His star-powered might comes out in fights in the form of huge energy blasts and laser beams, making him a potent addition to the team. And the moment he joins the party will be extra significant in the remake, because once a whole trio is assembled, you'll be able to start using Triple Moves!

damage that would otherwise be done to you, again if you press a button with proper timing.

I loved this kind of combat in the old SNES version, but there were a few special techniques that took the button pressing a little too far for my taste – asking you to button-mash as fast as possible to charge up a beam strike, for instance. I wonder if some of those thumb-damaging input requests might get changed in this remake?

MAKING BATTLES BETTER

That's no baseless speculation there, since we already have confirmation that the combat is getting a few tweaks for this new version.

First up? There's an all-new meter on the screen! The circular Action Gauge in the lower left fills up bit by bit as battles roll on, slowly building up from 0 to 100%. When it's fully charged, your current trio of heroes will be able to unleash a brand-new Triple Move technique! These are massive, cinematic super attacks that trigger cool cutscenes to play and result in major damage being dealt to your opponents. They're all totally new, since no super techniques like this ever existed back in the 1996 original version!

Additionally, the new developers have added an element of splash damage that also wasn't in place back in the '90s. This is an extra bonus for executing good timed hits – not only will well-timed button presses add damage to your hero's primary target, but a wave of extra damage will wash out from your point of impact and lower the HP of all the other enemies present on the screen as well.

Now, veterans, I can hear your worry before you even voice it: Won't this make battles too easy? Fights were perfectly winnable without this new splash damage or the screen-blasting Triple Moves, so will their introduction just make every combat scene a total cakewalk? The answer is . . . maybe? It all depends on whether or not the enemies' HP totals and defensive stats have been adjusted to take into account the extra incoming pain that's about to be heaped upon them. If they've balanced the game well, then these additions will enhance the overall experience. If they haven't, though, and we are indeed going to just be mowing through every random encounter and boss fight without any trouble, you can expect that to be a chief complaint that will be leveled against this remake, and something that will lower lots of review scores.

MASTER OF MIGHT & MENACE

BOWSER

As the video game industry has aged and the Super Mario Bros. series has expanded to encompass dozens of different games, shows and other story sources, the relationship between Mario and Bowser has been revisited and remixed on countless occasions. But when Super Mario RPG was first released, the entire Super Mario franchise was barely over one decade old – so it was a genuine shock when Bowser actually joined Mario as a "good guy" in this adventure!

I suppose it's more of a "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" kind of situation, because the Smithy Gang has taken over Bowser's Castle, and he wants it back – which means burying the hatchet (temporarily) with his longtime rival. But no matter what his motivation is, it's great to have Bowser on the team, because his massive muscles do huge damage in battle, and his special techniques can make foes freak out from fear!

THE HELPFUL HEALER

PRINCESS PEACH

Only slightly less shocking than seeing Bowser join the adventuring party was witnessing "Princess Toadstool" also come out swinging! She had only been playable once before, in Super Mario Bros. 2, and was fully still in her early era of almost always serving as a simple damsel in distress. Super Mario RPG began important role-expanding work for her character, as she charged into the fray and started smacking enemies around with a frying pan!

Peach is also a critically important ally in several boss battles in this game, because she has the most helpful set of healing techniques – she can keep Mario and the others on their feet and fighting even as high-damage attacks pour in from enemies on every turn. It's nice timing to have this callback to one of her earlier major playable roles now that we're getting Princess Peach: Showtime! in just a few more months!

THE RENAME GAME

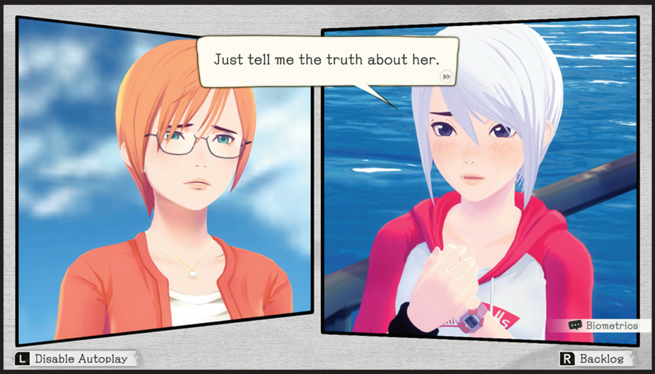
Speaking of changes that have the potential to make old-timers like me shake our fists with consternation, it's also been confirmed that this version of Super Mario RPG is getting a fresh localization – meaning that some lines of dialogue and enemy names from the original will be totally altered.

That's not too surprising, since the English text originally written for this game years ago was kind of famously bad in several places. Some straightforward names of foes (or parts of foes) were exceptionally weirdly named: a mouth you could target on one boss in particular, which should have been called "Mouth," was instead translated as "Neosquid." Huh? Other references or jokes didn't make the transition into English well either, like the spear-themed warrior being called "Yaridovich." That sounds cool, but misses some meaning in his name. The remake will call him Speardovich instead, which might be an overcorrection, but it is a better translation.

OLD AND NEW

This remake is so fascinating, because it again is being set up to serve its original purpose of being an entry point into RPGs for a whole new generation of potential future fans of the genre, but at the same time it's also going to be a huge nostalgia explosion for anyone who was around 27 years ago and played the original in their younger days. I'm confident that it will be able to succeed on both fronts – I'm excitedly looking forward to my own playthrough so I can revisit all the great settings and scenes I first saw so long ago, but I'm also eager to hand the controller over to my kids too, to see how they do with a role-playing game. (Beyond their usual Pokémon fare, that is.)

And, of course, the release of this remake is only going to rekindle the fandom's flames – stoking the fires for probably another couple of decades' worth of asks for Geno to be added to Smash, as well as for this adventure to just get a direct sequel! Just last year, Chihiro Fujioka, who directed the 1996 version, said that he'd like to make a Super Mario RPG 2 as his final game before he retires from the industry. Will he get that chance? It didn't seem at all likely when he said it, but now? It seems like it could happen! **– LUCAS**



ANOTHER CODE: RECOLLECTION

Trace Memory returns, alongside its never-seen-in-America sequel!

TWO OF THE finest adventure games of the DS and Wii era will be making a grand return (or a first-time debut, depending on where you live) with the surprisingly unexpected but welcomed release of Another Code: Recollection. This updated revival compiles both 2005's Trace Memory – a cult classic for the DS – and 2009's Another Code: R, its Wii follow-up that previously saw release only in Japan and Europe.

Trace Memory may be just a faint memory for those who got in on the ground floor during the DS days. The game spins the tale of teenager Ashley Robbins as she travels to Blood Edward Island to solve the mystery behind the disappearance of her neuroscientist parents . . . with the aid of a mysterious ghost. In the follow-up, she finds even more of her family's skeletons to dig up during a summer vacation to a sleepy lakeside town.

Players who may have missed out on these titles (especially the sequel, appearing for the first time Stateside) are in for quite the treat. Both games use their sci-fi-tinged supernatural frameworks to delve into topics of memory loss, tragedy and trauma by guiding Ashley through a web of conversations and puzzles. It's quite similar to the likes of Myst, tasking players with solving physical puzzles directly via stylus controls or the Wii Remote's gyroscopic features. (If you're a tad young to remember Myst, a modern escape room is an equally apt comparison.)

From the brief snippets we've seen so far, it seems much of this gameplay is retained and updated through the Switch's touch and motion controls – but what gets an entire overhaul here are the graphics! While the puzzles in Trace Memory often made use of the DS' 3D capabilities, characters were relegated to 2D illustrations. With Another Code: Recollection, both games get presented using three fully modelled dimensions, in a cleaned-up take on Another Code: R's visuals.

It's exciting to see these games get another chance to resonate with a new audience, one that's been readily primed with similarly melancholy adventures like Famicom Detective Club and Paranormasight. While the games have certainly had their fans, American players at the time were a bit indifferent to the slower-paced and narrative-heavy direction of Trace Memory, perhaps contributing the sequel's Western absence.

It'll definitely be exciting to see how all the gameplay and visuals will be updated through both adventures, but there's little doubt that their most engrossing aspects will remain their unforgettable mysteries. For me, they instilled lasting memories I can still recall to this day! **– JOHN-CHARLES**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPERS: NINTENDO & CING
RELEASE: JANUARY 19, 2024 RATING: T

YS X: NORDICS

Two-hero tag-team action fuels the Ys series' latest adventure!

IF A VIDEO game franchise makes it to its tenth entry, it's due in part to two crucial factors: a solid foundation of gameplay concepts and thoughtful changes to keep the experience fresh.

Nihon Falcom's Ys series has employed this formula for more than 35 years and reached its 10th mainline installment in September, when Ys X: Nordics released on September 28 in Japan and Asia. While an English localization hasn't been announced yet, this RPG-themed issue is a perfect time to spotlight the newest entry in one of the longest-running action RPG series ever!

Ys X: Nordics features key components of the series: Protagonist Adol Christin takes center stage as usual, with his thirst for adventure and propensity for shipwrecks never failing. Exploration and action combat rule the day as you venture through dungeons and slash through enemies big and small. A colorful cast of characters joins Adol, like his right hand man Dogi and new heroine Karja Balta, known as the pirate princess.

Their story begins in Obelia Bay and its many islands, as Adol encounters Karja's people: the Normans, a faction of oceanic warriors, and a group of undead attacking those in the area.

If you played recent Ys entries such as Ys VIII: Lacrimosa of Dana and Ys IX: Monstrum Nox, then Ys X: Nordics won't take long to change up what you're used to.

Adol is younger during this adventure, going from 24 in Ys IX to 17 in Ys X. (The Ys games don't present Adol's story in chronological order. Ys X: Nordics takes place after Ys I & II).

You also won't have a party of characters to switch around in combat. Adol and Karja are the sole playable characters this time, and the combat system has been adjusted to fit around this pair and their story.

Ys X: Nordics features the new Cross Action system with two modes: a speedy Solo Mode, where you can switch between Adol and Karja (and the other will attack automatically); and a slower Combination Mode, where you control Adol and Karja at the same time to deliver more powerful attacks.

Adol and Karja also possess special Mana-focused actions that aid in exploration. They can be acquired by finding antiques. They include Mana String, which can be used like a grappling hook; Mana Ride, where you can travel via hoverboard on water and air currents; Mana Burst, which allows Adol and Karja to create elemental blasts in and out of combat, and Mana Sense, which can reveal items not normally visible to the naked eye.

Another new addition in Ys X is the inclusion of naval battles. (Considering Adol's track record with ships, this mechanic is both interesting and hilarious.) These battles are all about positioning your ship and aiming cannonballs. You can also board enemy ships and trade with merchant vessels.

Ys X: Nordics marks several firsts for the franchise beyond gameplay and cast changes. It's the first Ys game to use Nihon Falcom's latest engine, and it's the first Ys game to release on multiple consoles simultaneously in Japan.

In a way, Ys X: Nordics also represents the increase in Falcom's efforts to reach the ever-growing Switch audience in Japan. In an interview with Japanese outlet Famitsu, Falcom President Toshihiro Kondo said featuring younger main characters (Adol and Karja are both 17 in Ys X) was a way for them to appeal to the Switch player base.

While I think Falcom is a bit late to the party in that regard, I'm glad to see them making the Switch a priority, not only because I'm a Nintendo fan, but because it will ultimately get more eyes on their games in the future.

The wait for an official localization announcement continues! **— MAGGIE**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NIS AMERICA
DEVELOPER: NIHON FALCOM
RELEASE: TBA RATING: RP

SCREENSHOTS TAKEN FROM THE JAPANESE PLAYSTATION 5 VERSION

UNICORN OVERLORD

Vanillaware takes a turn toward the tactical.

TWO DEFINING FEATURES of Vanillaware games: beautiful hand-drawn art styles, and titles that can be a bit of a mouthful.

The Japanese developer's latest project, a tactical fantasy RPG called Unicorn Overlord, continues both trends. And it may prove to be their most ambitious title yet!

Everything we've seen from Unicorn Overlord so far points to it being an absolute feast for RPG fans, from its style and scope to its story and systems.

Its setting houses five nations: Cornia, Elheim, Bastorias, Albion and Drakenhold. Alain, prince of Cornia, takes center stage as the protagonist. The story begins when Cornia's General Valmore betrays the royal family and throws the continent into chaos.

Ten years pass. Then Alain, now 17, begins building an army to face Valmore and liberate those under his control.

As Alain, you can travel the world however you wish and recruit more than 60 characters to form your army, including humans, elves, angels and beastfolk called bestrals. These characters can then be trained and combined to make units with different skills and tactics.

The game's real-time battles feature two main components: The overall stage, where you must command units and fulfill specific victory conditions, and the individual battles between units.

It's no surprise the developers estimate a lengthy playtime for this one. In an interview with Famitsu, they revealed the main story can take around 50 hours, and if you add in sidequests, it can increase to over 100 hours!

Vanillaware's most recent release, the visual novel/RTS hybrid 13 Sentinels: Aegis Rim, blew me away with its captivating story and style. But it first went on sale in 2019 – so half a decade since has been invested in crafting this follow-up and its meatier RPG experience. I can't wait to see more of what they've been working on! **– MAGGIE**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: ATLUS DEVELOPER: VANILLAWARE RELEASE: MARCH 8, 2024 RATING: T

EIYUDEN CHRONICLE: HUNDRED HEROES

Build an army with over 100 playable characters!

ALMOST FOUR YEARS after being successfully Kickstarted, the spiritual successor to Konami's Suikoden RPG series, Eiyuden Chronicle: Hundred Heroes, will finally arrive on consoles in April.

While the title promises 100 heroes – including magical girls, martial artists, bipedal sharks and capybaras – the tale centers on just three young people from the continent of Allraan, a land where magic is powered by artifacts called Rune Lenses. Seign is a military officer of the technologically advanced Galdean Empire, which is searching for an artifact, the Primal Lens, that will grant them immense power. On one of his missions to the lands known as the League of Nations, he meets Nowa, a young man who works as a guard in a small village – and while they become friends at first, their relationship begins to crumble under the strain of impending conquest and war. Meanwhile, a young woman named Marisa, who carries a Rune Lens on the back of her hand, guards her forest homeland from impending threats, while both the League and the Empire begin to covet her and her clan's abilities to manipulate the Rune Lenses.

Like Suikoden, you'll be able to establish a home base and engage in all sorts of minigames and sidequests, such as fishing, farming, trading card games, monster breeding and racing, and even top-spinning contests! The Kickstarter also unlocked options such as New Game Plus and the abilities to form guilds and establish trade routes. Development at Rabbit & Bear Studios is being led by many veterans of the original Suikoden series, including original creator Yoshitaka Murayama and character designer Junko Kawano. All in all, it looks promising! **– REBECCA**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: 505 GAMES DEVELOPER: RABBIT AND BEAR STUDIOS RELEASE: APRIL 23, 2024 RATING: RP

DRAGON QUEST MONSTERS: THE DARK PRINCE

Wrangling and mangling.

AFTER YEARS OF them learning the full 1,000+ Pocket Monster bestiary of the Pokémon series, I thought it might be time for my kids to be exposed to a (to them) all-new array of video game beasts. I began a fresh playthrough of Dragon Quest XI with Carter, Calvin, Cooper and Colson parked on the couch beside me, and have been reliving that adventure as a "Daddy Plays" entertainment spectacle for the kids, the same way they've recently experienced Tears of the Kingdom and Pikmin 4. And, sure enough, the many different monsters in Dragon Quest's world have been the element that has most caught their eyes – they've been loving being introduced to everything from the most common Slimes all the way up to the titular gigantic Dragons.

All of this, of course, is also preparing them for Dragon Quest Monsters.

This Dragon Quest spin-off series has been inactive in America for so long that I was actually the one who reviewed its most recently localized installment, Dragon Quest Monsters: Joker 2, for IGN, over 12 years ago! It launched on the DS in 2011, when I was still a fully active member of the IGN Nintendo team, Nintendo Power magazine was still publishing new issues and Nintendo Force hadn't even begun to be brainstormed yet. That's a long time for a brand to go silent – but it has still been kicking over in Japan, where the world's biggest DQ superfans got to enjoy Joker 3 on the 3DS and a few different mobile games that kept the Monsters sub-series alive in its homeland, at least.

Well, Square Enix is finally greenlighting another Western release for DQM, and I'm hoping the whole world takes notice! Because the Monsters gameplay, as I first wrote back in 2011, can be "pure, addictive fun."

Unlike traditional Dragon Quest games, the heroes in Monsters titles do no fighting themselves – in fact, the hero of this new sequel, subtitled "The Dark Prince," has been specifically cursed to never be able to bring harm to any monsters by his own hand. But that's OK! Because instead of swinging a sword or slinging magic spells to prevail in battles, he can just recruit monsters of his own to go out and fight against the other monsters!

If that sounds a lot like Pokémon, you're on the right track – this series got its start in response to the phenomenal adoration Japanese gamers expressed for Game Freak's first 151 catchable creatures over a quarter of a century ago, when the Dragon Quest developers said to themselves, "Hey, we've got a whole bunch of monsters too! We should just make a game like Pokémon, but populated with our own well-known enemy designs!" So they did! But the catching is a bit different.

Instead of capturing monsters, you simply persuade them to join your team of their own free will. Your active roster attacks potential recruits with a "show of force" to demonstrate how strong they are, which encourages the targeted new draft pick to consider becoming a part of the squad too. That increases a success percentage, and you ultimately roll the dice and hope that the odds are in your favor enough for them to agree and sign on.

Once you've got a good variety of recruited monsters, you can then work to level them up – and fuse them with one another to create more powerful combination creatures! That's another departure from Pokémon, where each 'mon simply grows and evolves on its own. In DQM, the grandest beasts can only be obtained by tossing lesser monsters into a mixer together!

If you too are ready for a fresh cast of "gotta catch 'em all" creatures, give these Monsters a look! **– LUCAS**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: SQUARE ENIX RELEASE: DECEMBER 1, 2023 RATING: E10+

DRAGON QUEST III: HD-2D REMAKE

Well, we're still waiting.

IT'S BEEN 10 issues since we last checked in on this highly anticipated remake of the classic third Dragon Quest game, and . . . we're still anticipating it. Still anticipating even another recognition of its continued existence, actually, since it's been radio silence from Square Enix for over two years at this point!

The only acknowledgement the game's received recently came through a Famitsu interview with series creator Yuji Horii this past August. He said at the time that Dragon Quest III: HD-2D Remake is "progressing quite steadily." Aaand . . . that's all!

I guess we don't have to be concerned that it's been cancelled, but still, throw us a bit more of a bone, Mr. Horii! This stunning remake was revealed in May 2021, and its first trailer is still all we've seen of it.

Other HD-2D titles have come and gone in the two and half years since that unveiling, and Dragon Quest III has been remade multiple times before . . . so what's going on with this one? Well, at this point, I have to imagine Square Enix is just holding it back on purpose, waiting for just the right time to re-reveal it and get fans fired up all over again.

It makes sense — they've got titles like Dragon Quest Monsters: The Dark Prince that they want to promote first. If they were to come out with a new DQIII trailer before that lesser-known spin-off made it to market, they'd be stealing its thunder for sure. Starving the fans for more mainline titles is a way to boost adoption of the side games!

Hardware might also be in the mix as a reason for the no new news. This game would run just fine on the Switch, no doubt, but they may still want to hold off and make it a "Switch 2" launch game instead of a late-gen Switch release. In fact, Nintendo might've even asked them to do just that! **— LUCAS**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: SQUARE ENIX RELEASE: TBA RATING: RP

DRAGON QUEST XII: THE FLAMES OF FATE

Nothing much new to report here either!

ONCE UPON A time, getting to play a new Dragon Quest game was an annual event.

The series got its start in Japan in 1986, and it saw its first sequel in 1987 . . . then its second in 1988. (That was the OG Dragon Quest III!) Things slowed only slightly after that, with Dragon Quest IV arriving in 1990, V in 1992 and VI in 1995. The franchise had six mainline installments before it even turned a decade old!

Here in the States, the series got started later but also sped through its first four games in less than four years: the retitled Dragon Warrior dropped in 1989, Dragon Warrior II in 1990 and both III and IV shared the 1992 calendar year. If the series had maintained this pace, we would've been on something like Dragon Quest XXX by this point!

(Hmm . . . something tells me they'll avoid Roman numerals if they actually get to a 30th game.)

Anyway, all this rambling about the good old days of little waiting between DQ sequels is brought to you by the fact that we've past the six-year mark of waiting for Dragon Quest XII to appear, and it's looking like we'll probably sail past seven before even getting another tiny glimpse at the game.

The one tiny glimpse we've had so far is reprinted for your viewing pleasure above: the game's fiery logo. That, and its similarly hot subtitle "The Flames of Fate" were revealed alongside the existence of the game itself back in May 2021, just like Dragon Quest III: HD-2D Remake — and, just like Dragon Quest III: HD-2D Remake, we've heard next to nothing about the game ever since.

There are at least some rumors swirling around this one, though. Supposedly Yuji Horii and his team of Dragon Quest co-creators have hit a stumbling block in trying to figure out just how to make DQXII feel new and different. Horii had promised a darker tone for the story — which would match that intense logo — as well as more meaningful choices for the player to make. (We've come a long way from Princess Gwaelin refusing to take no for an answer. "Dost thou love me?")

The other bullet point that's been ricocheting around about this sequel is that it's planned to alter the series' traditional turn-based combat. Perhaps going to real-time battles instead? But then the DQ series has already attempted that, in Infinity Strash (see our review of that one later in this very issue!). So maybe they'd do a hybrid of action combat and some menu selections, as the Final Fantasy VII remakes have done?

I know this is a lot of the same speculation we've already floated, but what else can we do but circle back around and repeat ourselves when waiting this long for new news to arrive? Here's hoping this game finds its path soon. **— LUCAS**

SWITCH? PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: SQUARE ENIX RELEASE: TBA RATING: RP

STAR OCEAN: THE SECOND STORY R

Another classic Enix epic earns itself a modern visual overhaul.

SINCE ITS INCEPTION, the Star Ocean series has fused together sci-fi and fantasy elements to create interesting dichotomies within its games. Star Ocean: The Second Story R, an upcoming remake of the franchise's second entry, features even more fascinating combinations, from its story and dual protagonists' perspectives to its unique art style.

Star Ocean: The Second Story R is the third iteration of this classic action RPG from Square Enix. It first released as Star Ocean: The Second Story on PlayStation in 1999 and later received an enhanced remaster for PSP in 2009. The Second Story R will release on November 2 on Nintendo Switch with additions including a 2.5D art style, new battle mechanics, a freshly rearranged soundtrack and full English and Japanese voiceovers.

You can test it out via an eShop demo that begins at the start of the game and allows for three hours of play. Progress from the demo will carry over.

When the game begins, you're tasked with the important choice of picking between Claude C. Kenny and Rena Lanford as your protagonist, and that selection will affect your playthrough in several ways.

Claude is an officer with the Pangalactic Federation and ends up on the planet of Expel by accident. He's very much a fish out of water on that backwater world, with his modern clothes and advanced technology.

Rena lives in the quaint village of Arlia on Expel and possesses unusual healing abilities. She meets Claude in a nearby forest, and the two eventually set off on a journey together to save Expel from mysterious forces.

Depending on who you choose, you will experience the story from Claude or Rena's perspective. During the demo, I saw a scene as Rena that provided key details about her past, which wouldn't have been revealed if I played as Claude.

This choice also affects which allies you can recruit and your relationships with them. At certain points in the story, Claude or Rena will go off on their own, and you'll have opportunities to bond with party members via private actions. These are one-on-one events that will either grow or lessen your affinity with characters, and they have a direct result on the story and possible endings.

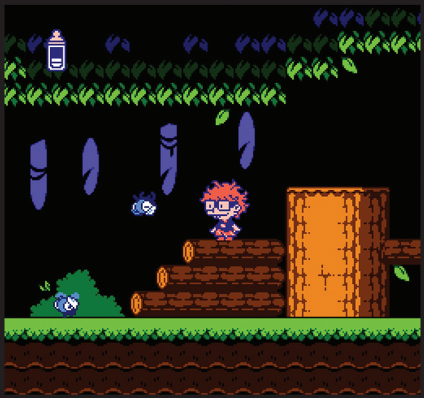
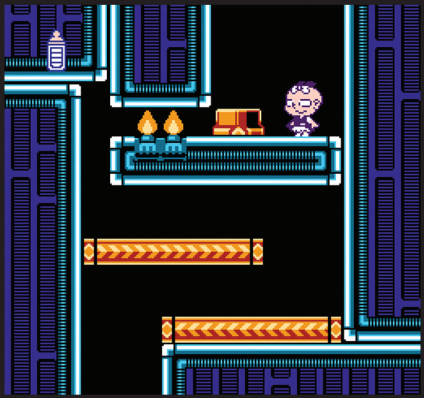
The Second Story R utilizes a real-time action combat system. Combat activates once you come into contact with an enemy and are taken to a separate battle screen. Here, you can move around freely, attack enemies and employ special abilities. Rena, for example, has healing and elemental spells.

Another important component is timing a counter attack when an enemy turns red, which then places you in an advantageous position behind the foe.

The demo also showcases The Second Story R's 2.5D aesthetic, where the environments are in 3D but the characters feature a 2D pixelated style, accompanied by portraits that appear during certain dialogue.

When I saw The Second Story R's announcement trailer back in June, I was hooked, and playing the demo only confirmed my expectations. The game's focus on combining sci-fi and fantasy along with new and old features is set to provide an adventure that will appeal to a wide array of RPG fans! **– MAGGIE**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: SQUARE ENIX RELEASE: NOVEMBER 2, 2023 RATING: T

RUGRATS: ADVENTURES IN GAMELAND

Rewriting NES history with a brand-new old-brand adventure!

THEY NEVER MADE an ALF game for the NES. Kindergarten Cop was a popular Arnold Schwarzenegger film released at the height of NES mania – it could've been adapted. And how about Adventures of the Gummi Bears? That classic Disney toon first went on the air just one month before the NES first went on sale, and it kept getting new episodes all the way through to 1991. Did Capcom never consider it when they were licensing everything else Disney made in that era to become new 8-bit Nintendo titles?

One of my oddly specific secret unspoken dreams through the last few years has been that some developer would go back to the NES and make new licensed games for it – but based on licenses that actually existed in the late '80s and early '90s. Games that reasonably could have existed back then, but just never did. (Again, this is, I know, an oddly specific thing to hope for. Which is why I never spoke of it!)

But the dev team at Wallride must have read my diary! Because here we have exactly what I've been wanting: a brand-new NES title based on a license that was active in the NES era, but never got a game at the time. Rugrats!

Rugrats was one of the original Nicktoons, premiering alongside Doug and Ren & Stimpy on Nickelodeon in 1991. That could have been enough time to inspire a late-gen NES tie-in title – and Ren & Stimpy actually got one in 1993 – but Rugrats fans had to wait until '98 for its first video games to appear (on PS1 and Game Boy), and the NES was long retired by then.

Now, however, the timeline of NES tie-ins is being twisted! This release, Rugrats: Adventures in Gameland, is being both made and published as an actual NES title, fully compatible with original hardware. Tommy Pickles, Chuckie Finster and both Phil and Lil DeVille are all playable 8-bit babies at long last, on a platforming quest that's inspired by all the hits of that era.

They've got a health meter that looks like Mega Man's HP gauge fused with a baby bottle. They'll be picking up and chucking enemies as in Super Mario Bros. 2. There's even key collection to open locked barriers like Zelda II!

All in all, Adventures in Gameland seems to be hitting all the right notes for an enjoyable NES quest. But . . . it's not just being made for NES! The devs are simultaneously making the NES game's modern, HD-ified remake – as if the base game really did exist over 30 years ago and it's finally being revisited now. Like past direct visual revamps like DuckTales: Remastered or Wonder Boy: The Dragon's Trap, it looks like the gameplay will be entirely unchanged for the "remake" – it'll just look like the cartoon come to life.

It's all a dream come true for me! (Guess I'll keep crossing my fingers for Kindergarten Cop, too?) **– LUCAS**

NES SWITCH PUBLISHER: MIX GAMES DEVELOPER: WALLRIDE
RELEASE: TBA 2024 RATING: RP

GAME CENTER CX: ARINO NO CHOUSENJOU 1 + 2 REPLAY

Retro Game Challenge returns! But does it have any chance of being localized this time?

SHINYA ARINO HAS been laughing, crying, living and dying while playing retro games on Japanese television since 2003. That's two years before YouTube even existed! He's the unsung Godfather of the modern Let's Play, and his show, Game Center CX, has been popular enough to spawn three game adaptations.

Known as Retro Game Challenge in English, each entry in the series brings you back to Japan in the 1980s, where young Arino plays a library of fictional retro titles with his friend (the player) while leafing through game magazines for tips and tricks. The first two Retro Game Challenge titles were developed for the DS by indieszero, the highly respected team behind the NES Remix and Theatrhythm Final Fantasy games.

SWITCH PUBLISHER: BANDAI NAMCO DEVELOPER: INDIESZERO
RELEASE: TBA (IN JAPAN) RATING: RP

The third was for the 3DS, came from a different developer, and wasn't all that well received. In fact, way before he became the Editorial Director on The Making of Karateka, Wired Games Editor Chris Kohler called it "horrible" and "A dog's breakfast."

That's probably why that third game is being left out of this package. Instead, this compilation of the first two games will come complete with a new title screen, over 400 new lines of dialogue by Arino-san himself . . . and an all-new retro game to boot!

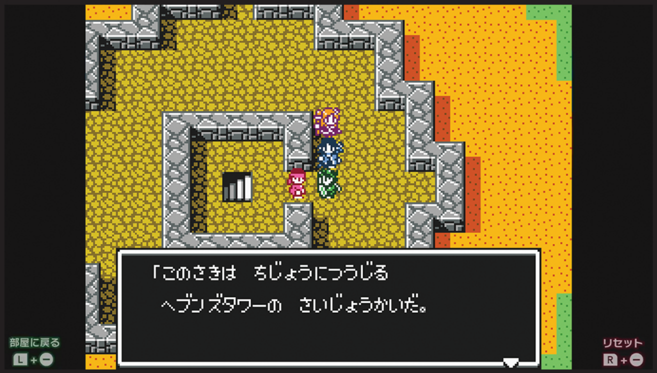
This collection has not yet been announced for Western localization, but hopefully the timing will finally be right for this fantastic series to find a big audience outside of Japan.

The first Retro Game Challenge was the only one to get an official English release. It was beloved by Western critics, but it failed to convert that praise into big sales numbers. Eight different 8-bit-styled games were included, including the Galaga-alike Cosmic Gate, the Dragon Warrior/Pokémon tribute Guardia Quest and a trilogy of titles that showed the evolution of a robot ninja mascot named Haggleman. Every one of them held a deep love for how the NES' library developed over the console's lifespan.

The second Retro Game Challenge – which is still only playable in English via fan translation – did even more to celebrate gaming in the '80s, perfectly mixing light parody with a sharp, almost academic understanding of what defined that decade of gaming. It contained 20 titles, including a few "EX" versions of the games from its predecessor, along with new games in the style of the NES, the Game Boy, Game Boy Color and even the SNES! And just about all of them could hold their own as standalone releases. My favorite is Mutekiken Kung-Fu, which took the best elements of Karateka and Kung-Fu Master and combined them with new ideas like bear fighting. But Demon Returns and its 16-bit sequel Super Demon Returns are nothing to shake a stick at either! Their blending of Super Mario platforming with the spooky antics of Ghosts 'N Goblins could have made them household names had they been released as real games on the NES and SNES back in the day.

The all-new title in this package is made in the style of the River City Ransom/Kunio-kun series. It looks fantastic: fluidly animated and reminiscent of the source material, while still having its own unique personality.

But will this collection ever be localized? Well, XSEED brought us the original in 2009, so that's a possibility. Or, maybe gaming personality Dunkey and his Bigmode publishing label could pick it up? Teaming up with one of YouTube's most popular Let's Players could be exactly what these games need to take things to the next level! But that's all pure speculation. If you want the real news on any potential localization, keep reading this very magazine for updates. Now you're playing with force! **– JONATHAN**



WARIOWARE: MOVE IT!

Nintendo's official sequel to Smooth Moves!

WARIOWARE: SMOOTH MOVES was one of the Wii's earliest titles, and was arguably the best of that system's launch window lineup. Sure, Wii Sports broke boundaries, but Smooth Moves was just plain *fun*, whether you were turning your Wiimote into a telephone receiver, moving it like an elephant trunk or hopping obstacles with a friend in Bungee Buddies. WarioWare: Move It! is a direct successor – a fact made more clear in Japan, where Smooth Moves was called "Dancing: Made in Wario" and this follow-up is named "Super Dancing: Made in Wario." So you can bet that Move It! will feature a lot of the same kinds of fun as Smooth Moves! (But it will also have some returning favorites from other WarioWare titles too.)

Wario and his friends have won a vacation to a beautiful tropical island, where the local microgames revolve around Forms, where you hold a Joy-Con in each hand while posing or moving them in a specific way. Hold one at your nose and the other behind your back and bend forward to make a chicken peck up the dirt. Grip them like ski poles as you race across the finish line. Or point the Joy-Con's IR camera at your hand to detect how many fingers you're holding up! It's like the Form Baton and Balance Stone, but more high-tech! Along with the story mode for one or two players, there's also a local co-op party mode for up to four that includes such challenges as Listen to the Doctor and a Squid Game-esque "red light, green light" challenge against Medusa. With activities like this, their vacation will be anything but relaxing! **– REBECCA**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPERS: NINTENDO & INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS RELEASE: NOVEMBER 3, 2023 RATING: E10+

SUPER CRAZY RHYTHM CASTLE

Multiplayer musical chaos coming from Konami.

WAY BACK IN the days when Flash games ruled the Internet (which doesn't feel that long ago to me), there was a rhythm game series called Super Crazy Guitar Maniac Deluxe that was released to great acclaim on free platforms such as Newgrounds. Their popularity led to the formation of Second Impact Studios, which has partnered with Konami to bring players to the wacky and foreboding Super Crazy Rhythm Castle!

Playable either as a co-op (local and online) or solo quest, your characters have been "invited" to the castle of King Ferdinand, filled with all sorts of crazy obstacles, to challenge him in the ultimate rhythm showdown to topple him as ruler. Like many classic rhythm games, you'll need to press buttons as icons move in sequence down a conveyor, and keep to the rhythm – or take five and help clear the chamber's wacky puzzle! There are hungry creatures to feed, rooms to tidy, boxes to stack and laser guns to shoot! Along with the adventure mode, there's also a pure rhythm mode where you can play the tracks to your heart's content.

The game promises over 30 tracks, which seems like a small amount, but along with your traditional hip-hop and dubstep beats, it includes songs from some of Konami's classics, such as Gradius, Castlevania and Beatmania. Will we also be jamming along to tracks from Dance Dance Revolution or Metal Gear, or hopefully even some licensed tunes, like the soundalike to the Beastie Boys' "Intergalactic" that was in one of the trailers? Stay tune-d! **– REBECCA**

[EDITOR'S NOTE: If you like crazy castles, check out the excellent revival of Takeshi's Castle that's now on Amazon Prime!]

SWITCH PUBLISHER: KONAMI DEVELOPER: SECOND IMPACT GAMES RELEASE: NOVEMBER 14, 2023 RATING: E10+

PAPER MARIO: THE THOUSAND-YEAR DOOR

They're really doing it! They're fully remaking the best Paper Mario!

I'M NOT MUCH of an RPG person. But every now and then, I've been known to make an exception. And in 2004, I made one of those exceptions as I popped one particularly eagerly anticipated disc into my GameCube.

And I had a blast! Seeing some of my favorite characters, along with a whole new expanded cast, facing off against a new foe in a more story-driven role-playing game was a unique new experience for me. I played it from beginning to end, and enjoyed every minute of it.

Yes, Mega Man X: Command Mission was an absolute joy for me to behold at the time, and I really hope Capcom gives it some kind of re-release.

But once I was done with X's latest adventure, I popped in another disc: Paper Mario: The Thousand-Year Door. And the more I played, the more I was completely blown away. Sure, I enjoyed Command Mission, but this? This felt like the kind of experience I could only wish that Capcom had aspired to.

Some people say that no one plays Mario games for the story, but that's not true. I do. I mean, kind of.

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: NINTENDO RELEASE: TBA 2024 RATING: E

Admittedly, if that's all you're there for, then it's a pretty thin diet, but I've always found it best when they at least try a little to establish some sort of context. I don't know if I'd have been quite as captivated by the original Super Mario Bros. all those years ago had I not read the story in the manual about the evil Turtle Tribe invading the Mushroom Kingdom, and their leader turning the Mushroom people into bricks and stones, with the only hope of saving them lying in the rescue of Princess Toadstool. Far better than, say, New Super Mario Bros. 2, whose story was basically "here's another Mario game, but with more coins." A little something new to chew on is always nice.

Enter: Paper Mario: The Thousand-Year Door. (TTYD, for short.) If something as simple as that NES manual was something to chew on, then TTYD was a veritable smorgasbord.

Of course, it's worth mentioning that TTYD is by far not the first RPG Mario has ever graced. I don't have the room to get into the detail of the three preceding it here, but TTYD was arguably the concept at its peak. It drew me into the world of Mario in a way I'd never experienced before, even in those prior efforts.

And it's the world that helps make TTYD such a draw, especially if you're a longtime Mario fan. One of the great things about the world is the characters who inhabit it. How often have you been in a store, or shopping online, and seen a Koopa Troopa action figure or a Goomba plush, alongside the flagship characters like Mario and Peach?

Unfortunately, in most Mario games, those characters — such as they are — are presented as enemies. Fodder to be crushed underfoot as they prevent you from reaching your goal. Even when they're dancing to the music, they're still deadly foes who will send Mario toppling to whatever lies beneath the bottom of your game screen when approached.

In TTYD, though (and its N64 predecessor, to be fair), you're presented with a much more well-rounded view, as you discover that Goombas and Koopas and other species native to Mario's world aren't all bad. Many occupy towns and villages of their own, and have their own goals and dreams and relationships that don't involve kidnapping princesses.

Even better? Many of them will have someone who will befriend you and join your party! There's the sassy Goombella, a female Goomba who's a student of archaeology and can analyze enemies and areas throughout the game. Koops is a timid Troopa who is out to prove he's not a coward — and avenge his father's death! (No, Mario didn't do it.) A newly hatched baby Yoshi brings some spunky dinomight to the group, while Mario inspires Admiral Bobbery, a Bob-omb, back into a life of adventure. And in a case of playing against type, you can also recruit Ms. Mowz, a mouse who works as a cat burglar!

There are some new types, too. The voluptuous wind spirit known as Madame Flurrie lends her formidable lungs to the cause, and when the Shadow Siren Vivian has enough of dealing with her wicked sisters, she throws in with Mario's gang as well.

It's a wonderful blend of the new and familiar, as many of the creatures and species you may already know show off endearing new personalities, outfits, names and other traits that make them more than just one of many, but their own distinct entities. Heck, prior to playing TTYD, I was *not* a fan of the Piantas from Super Mario Sunshine. But after I saw two dressed up like members of the local mafia deliver a beating to a pair of Craws, I was entirely on board for anything this game would throw at me.

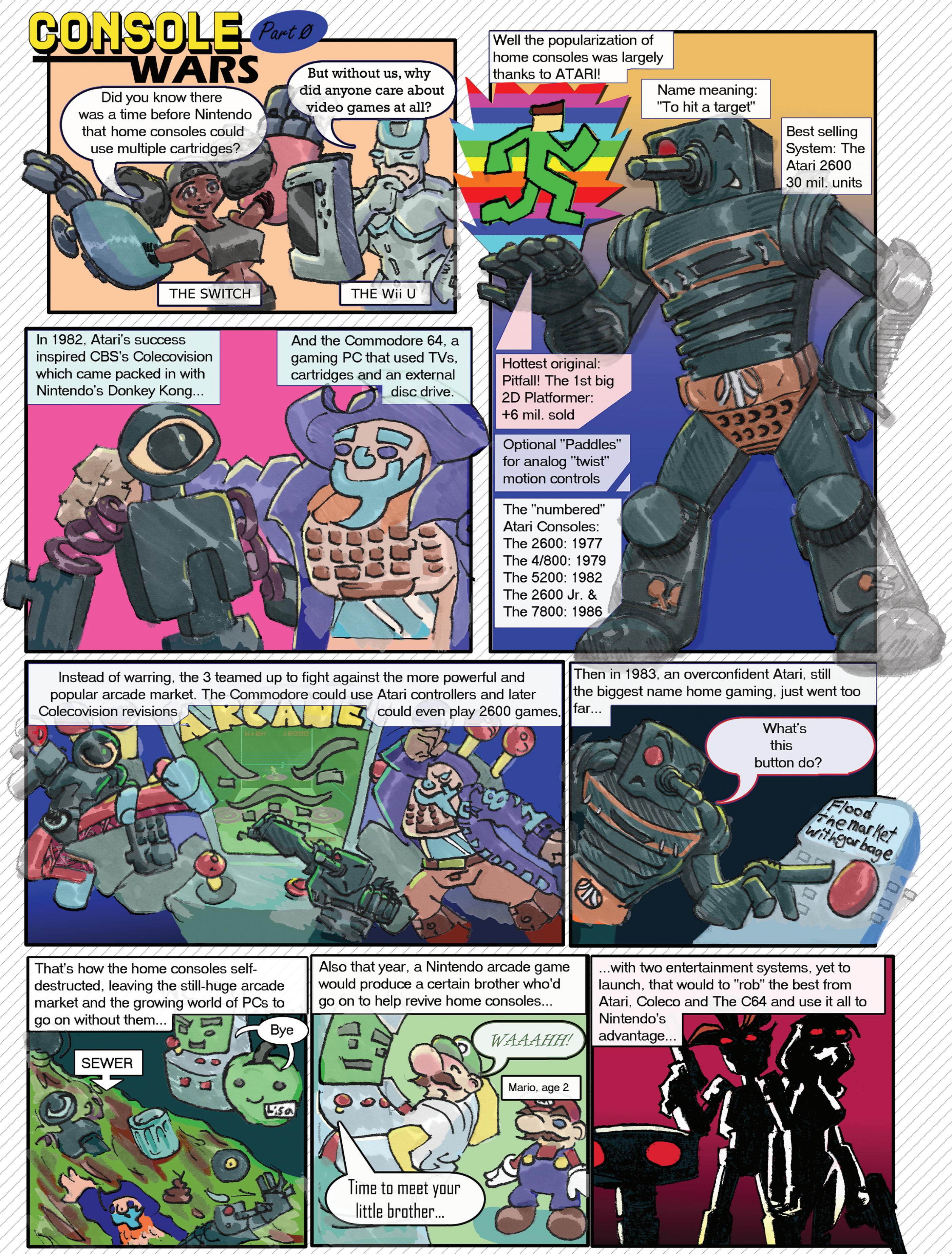
The characters are only part of the winning recipe here, though. Each area and chapter brings something new and unexpected to the experience, differing greatly from the last while still feeling like a part of the whole experience. In one chapter, you're battling a dragon in a castle, while in another, you're fighting your way up the ranks of a wrestling promotion to take on the reigning and defending champion, Rawk Hawk. Or taking a luxury train ride and playing detective to solve the crimes committed therein. Peach and Bowser get in on the action as playable characters, too, with the latter taking on classic 2D Mario stages in his own way. Between chapters, you can also catch up with Luigi, who's having his own Paper adventure parallel to yours.

All this, and we haven't even touched on the combat mechanics, the sidequests, the badges . . . oh, and the humor. TTYD is not just fun, but *funny*.

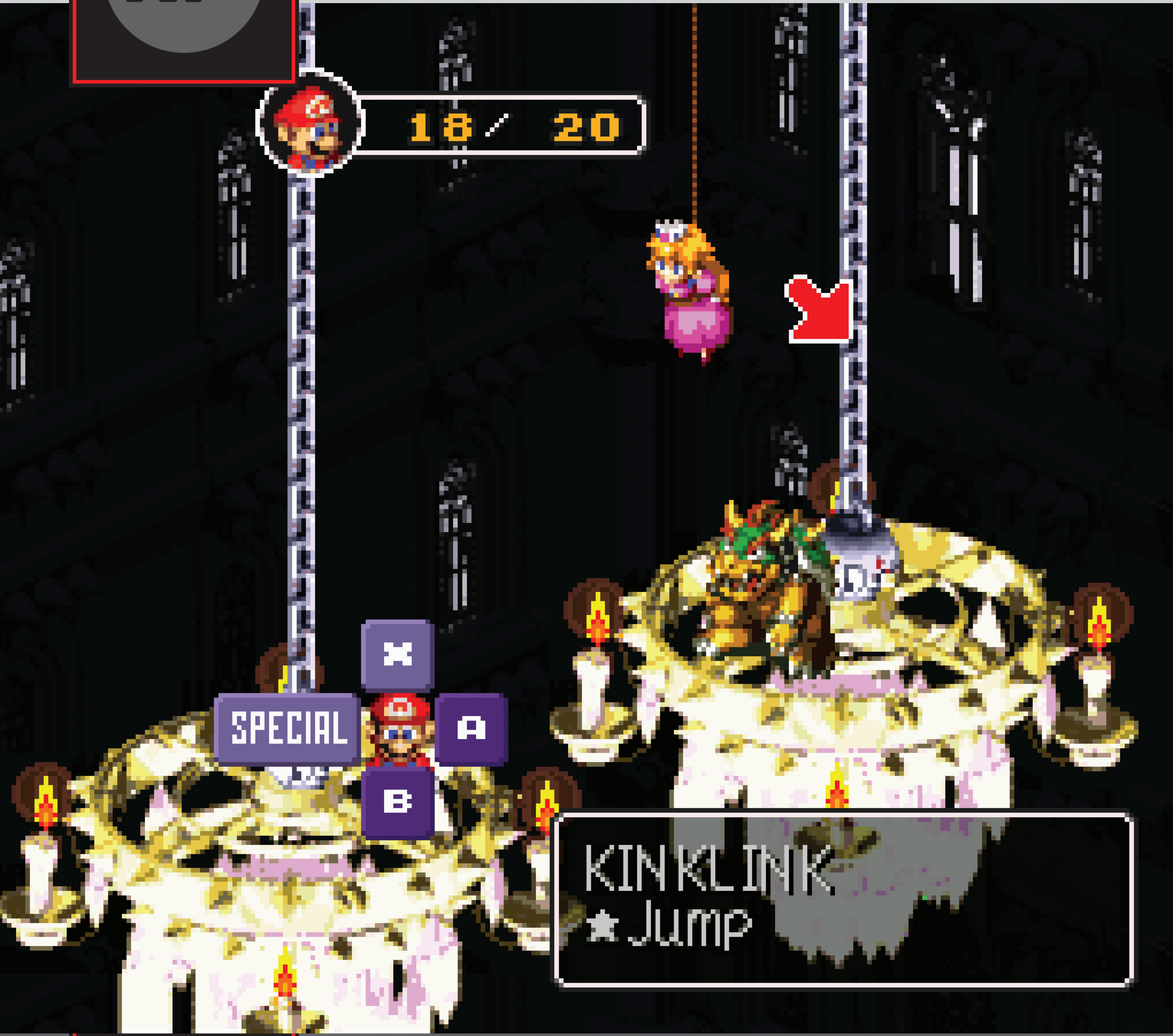
Unfortunately, after its release on the GameCube, Nintendo started moving away from what worked so well here. Super Paper Mario was a fine experiment that emphasized platforming over turn-based combat. Then, after eight long years, we thought we were witnessing a return to the Paper Mario we loved in 2012's Sticker Star on 3DS . . . but it turned out to be anything but. They'd continue to slowly crawl their way back toward the winning formula with Color Splash and Origami King, but there always seemed to be something missing. The fans who had experienced it knew what they wanted, and they wanted more Paper Mario like The Thousand-Year Door. And if not more, then at least a re-release? Please?

The pleas seemed to fall on deaf ears, though, until the September 2023 Nintendo Direct, when Nintendo finally answered our prayers. Hot on the heels of the Super Mario RPG remake for Switch, we were getting an enhanced version of this Player's Choice classic on the same platform!

Whereas the GameCube was one of Nintendo's less successful consoles, hopefully this release on one of their most successful platforms will help more people see what all the love has been about! **— DAVID**



BY JONATHAN HOLMES & PETE MARSHALL



AN ICONIC INTRO

SUPER MARIO RPG: LEGEND OF THE SEVEN STARS
SNES, 1996

Most of the Super Mario games save the saving the princess sequence for the climax of the quest – but Mario's first RPG played around with players' expectations! After Peach gets grabbed by Bowser in the game's opening cutscene, Mario of course leaps into action to rescue her. But that rescue takes place just a minute or two later, as the scene seen above appears on the screen! Rather than being a game-ending final battle, bopping Bowser simply serves as a tutorial instead, as newcomers learn the ropes of the turn-based, menu-driven battle system and the importance of selecting the correct target with their attacks. (Pro Tip: Bowser can't be beat! You need to aim for the chandelier-supporting "Kinklink" instead!) It's an excellent way to start an epic adventure – and this moment will surely make an even stronger first impression in the visually enhanced remake! **— LUCAS**

CHARACTER PROFILE

♥♪!? (A.K.A. GENO)

The spirit-possessed fighting doll who became such a fan favorite in his first game that diehards have been wishing on the stars for years that he would make some kind of comeback – and he finally will in the new Super Mario RPG remake! Let's look back on his journey.

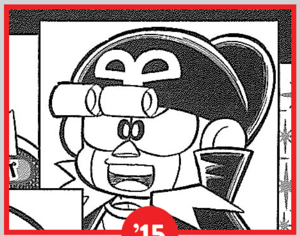
FIRST APPEARANCE
SUPER MARIO RPG: LEGEND OF THE SEVEN STARS **(SNES, 1996)**

CAREER HIGHS

Geno is a spirit from the stars who descends to Earth and inhabits a child's doll in order to take physical form. He then joins Mario's party!

'96

Fans demanded Geno return for so long, that some creators finally began to listen! He reappeared in the Super Mario-kun manga first . . .



'15

. . . and then was added to the Smash cast that same year. (But only as a Mii Fighter Outfit. No word yet on if he'll ever make the roster as a full fighter.)

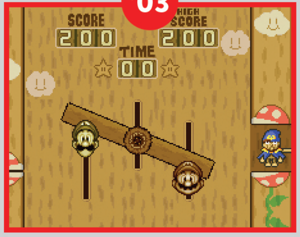
'15

CAREER LOWS

'96

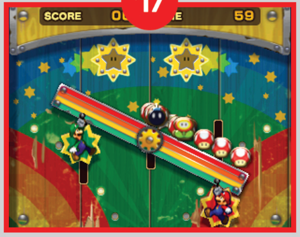
While he's an invaluable ally through Super Mario RPG, his story begins and ends with that game. He never got to become a recurring character.

'03



For the span of 20 years following his first appearance, Geno only popped up one other time, in a tiny cameo, hosting a minigame. That's all he got!

'17



Insultingly, when Mario & Luigi: Superstar Saga was remade for the 3DS, even his tiny minigame-hosting cameo got cut out completely.

Out of all the one-off RPG party members who Mario's teamed up with over the years, none has made as strong of a lasting impression as Geno. Players just connected with this character in a profound and enduring way. He's truly special!

'23

It's exciting that he'll finally get to step back into the spotlight after 27 years of relatively no activity. But, of course, this will only refresh fans' demands – will he be able to appear elsewhere now? Or just the remake?

HIGHLIGHTS

SUPER MARIO RPG: LEGEND OF THE SEVEN STARS
SNES, 1996

What made Geno the enduring favorite, instead of the also-only-seen-once Mallow? Maybe it was his powerful, flashy attack techniques, like the Geno Beam!

SUPER SMASH BROS. FOR Wii U & 3DS
Wii U & 3DS, 2014 (DLC RELEASED IN 2015)

Masahiro Sakurai has clearly noted fans' requests that Geno be allowed to join the Smash cast, as the character got plenty of votes back in the 2015 Fighter Ballot. Since he's owned by Square Enix, though, it would've been hard to prioritize him over their much more popular characters, like Cloud. Still, he did get a special Mii Fighter Outfit! That's not nothing!

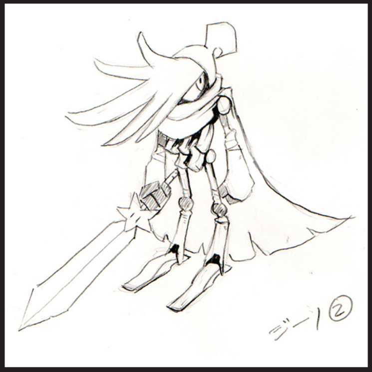
SUPER MARIO RPG
SWITCH, 2023

Seeing Geno brought back to life in brilliant high definition will be a true highlight of playing Super Mario RPG on the Switch. Even better than just seeing him back in action in the same scenes we already saw in the original game, though, will be watching him leap into action in all of the remake's special new cutscenes! He'll make an even bigger impact, for sure!

BY LUCAS M. THOMAS

"Why are you staring at me? You know I'm more than just a doll, don't you? Have you guessed the truth? I'm a visitor from above, and this is a form I'm borrowing briefly."

- SUPER MARIO RPG: LEGEND OF THE SEVEN STARS (SNES, 1996)



DON'T CUT YOURSELF ON THE EDGE

COOL CONCEPT ART

While the developers ultimately landed on a more friendly design, several more serious and intense options were considered while Geno was being conceptualized. The sword-wielding, thin-legged robot with an insanely spiky hairstyle, seen above, is my favorite of the alternatives! Geno really would've put the "Warrior" back into Star Warrior if he had looked like that!

WARP ZONE

What Nintendo Power was writing about way back when.

IT'S FINALLY HERE!

Well, it *was* finally here, 25 years ago, but for the purposes of this column, *it's finally here!* To celebrate the release of The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time, Nintendo Power released their biggest issue ever. And within its pages, Zelda was everywhere! Among other things, there was merch from BD&E and an early pre-order bonus of a golden cartridge for those who reserved the game.

In addition to 10 pages of Ocarina of Time coverage (plus a cool bonus poster), there was coverage of Star Wars: Rogue Squadron, Buck Bumble, Banjo-Kazooie (which shared poster space with the notorious Superman 64), Body Harvest, Glover, S.C.A.R.S., NHL '99, a preview of the aforementioned Superman 64, Fighting Force 64, Wipeout 64 and Extreme-G 2. Wow, guys, save some for December!

On the handheld side of things, there was big news, but not a lot of news. Just one thing, really (or two, if you count the latest Pokémon Power): the reveal of the new Game Boy Color, a handheld the gaming world had been dreaming of since 1989. The six-page spread showed off what the new Boy brought to the table, including color (56 on-screen at the same time), a new infrared wireless data port, color (32,769 for developers to choose from), beefier stats, and color. (Did we mention that it's a Game Boy . . . in *color?*) It was capable of running bigger games, as well as pretty much everything from your old monochrome library (and even had a mode for just that, but it's a shame it didn't have a Super Game Boy color mode). A dozen default color palettes could be applied to older games, while some newer titles could be played on old and new hardware, and others exclusively on the GBC. All this for a Manufacturer's Suggested Retail Price of $79.95! Just think, that's only about 10 bucks more than Tears of the Kingdom costs today!

To tie in with this announcement, 25 winners of this month's Player's Poll contest walked away with a Game Boy Color of their very own, plus five games. Second place winners received a Nintendo Power T-shirt, and third place . . . wait, these things used to have a third place, didn't they?

Out back in Pak Watch, Nintendo revealed what the future had in store for the Nintendo 64, and what it had in store was more memory. Remember the Expansion Pack? It's what helped games like Perfect Dark, Donkey Kong 64 and Rogue Squadron realize their utmost potential on the console. Other fun sprinkled throughout this section included South Park (well, it *sounded* fun), Vigilante 8 and Jet Force Gemini.

For the final issue of 1998, Star Wars: Rogue Squadron graced the cover, and inside, it got 10 pages of coverage. Not to be outdone, OoT returned for Round 2, with eight pages of its own. They were joined by a preview of BattleTanx and coverage of Body Harvest (which shared a poster, the latter showing tips), NBA Live '99, a four-page preview of Castlevania (which some people back in the day thought was the future of the franchise, all while scoffing at the 2D Symphony of the Night), Rush 2, Magical Tetris Challenge featuring Mickey, Top Gear Overdrive (which benefited from the Expansion Pak we were just talking about), Virtual Pool 64 and Golden Nugget 64.

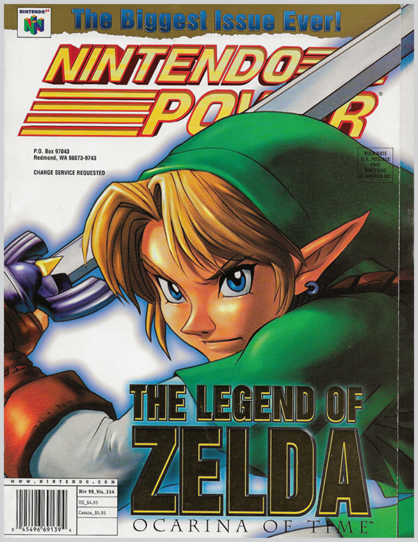
On the handheld side of things, there was – oh, you're going to love this. Remember that one licensed game that was added to Nintendo Switch Online not too long ago, and no one could figure out why? Quest for Camelot? Yep. That's the one and only Game Boy game – Color or otherwise – to be featured in this issue. It got a whopping six pages. Clearly, someone at Nintendo loved/loves that movie. Or at least the Game Boy adaptation of it.

Actually, that wasn't *quite* all – over the course of five pages was a mini-Pak Watch-like Buyer's Guide to the first wave of Game Boy Color releases, with blurbs for Blitz, Bomberman Pocket, Game & Watch Gallery 2, Gex, Men in Black, Mortal Kombat 4, Tetris DX, a whopping *three* Looney Tunes games, and more.

Over in Player's Poll, Nintendo Power and Kemco's Top Gear Overdrive wanted to put *you* behind the wheel of your very own Volkswagen New Beetle! Well, assuming you were of legal age to drive, that is. You'd also get a copy of the game, as would five second place winners. No car for them, though – not a real one, at least, but they did get 1:16 scale 1996 Dodge Viper GTS models. Why not '99? We're gonna guess overstock.

Pak Watch closed us out with more Star Wars, Ogre Battle 3 and both a Player's Guide and a kids' novelization of Ocarina of Time, which one Amazon user review from 1999 called "the worst video game-based novel I have ever read." **– DAVID**

ISSUE #114: NOVEMBER 1998



ISSUE #115: DECEMBER 1998

IS OOT AN RPG?

Since role-playing games were few and far between in the N64 library, there was some push 25 years ago to claim Ocarina of Time as an RPG – and the debate about whether the Zelda games should be counted as such has continued ever since. We'd lean more toward *no*, but it is true that Zelda games feature lots of the ABC elements we listed earlier!

INTERVIEW

DATE & PLACE OF BIRTH
June 10, 1958 in Kaimaishi, Iwate, Japan

FAVORITE FOOD
It's not a food, but I like wine.

CURRENT POSITION IN THE INDUSTRY
YS Net President and Founder

BEST KNOWN FOR
Hang-On, Space Harrier, OutRun, Virtua Fighter, Shenmue & Air Twister

YU SUZUKI

The industry legend who helped create 3D shoot-'em-ups with Space Harrier, and is now bringing them back!

INTERVIEW BY JONATHAN HOLMES

NF: Can you tell us a little about your life growing up, and how it might have influenced you to get into the games industry?
YU SUZUKI: Of course, I was born in Japan. *(laughs)* I grew up in a town with beautiful seas and mountains, and I am grateful for that. But it was also a place where there wasn't anything to play around with – where there were more bears, deer and pheasants than people. You couldn't rely on others to entertain you. You had to go out and create your own experiences.

When you first got into game development back in the early '80s, the whole concept of being a professional game developer was a relatively new thing. Why did you decide to risk embarking upon this largely uncharted career path?
The main reason is we got a two-day weekend. *(laughs)* Of course, joining a company for your profession isn't all fun and games. Hard work is also part of the package. My guess at that time was less than 10% of people would end up with careers they really loved, and the other 90% would have to put up with working jobs that they struggled with. The first group gets to follow the old saying "Live your hobby day by day!". And that's exactly what it was like at first. When I first joined the company, my work became a hobby, and I was grateful for that.

But I am also the kind of person who naturally adapts to rough conditions. When I was a student, I used to go camping, and when I slept at night, my head would swim with thoughts like "I'm thankful I'm not being rained on" and "it's great that the ground is flat." I didn't think about how much better it would be to sleep on a warm, soft futon. I just lay there thinking "the ground is flat." *(laughs)*

You sound like a naturally grateful person!

So, I'm wondering, when you were working on your first games at Sega, were you thinking more about how you could make games in your own way and to your own tastes, or were you driven more by the desire to show your gratitude to the people that gave you your start in the industry?
Of course, I love making games for myself, but what got me most excited was knowing that if I did a great job, I may get to see my boss smile. In the workplace, where you spend a lot of your life, your boss is the closest person to you. My boss [at Sega] was the one who took a risk on me in the first place. I always wanted to repay the person who cared about me the most in the company. I loved seeing his happy face.

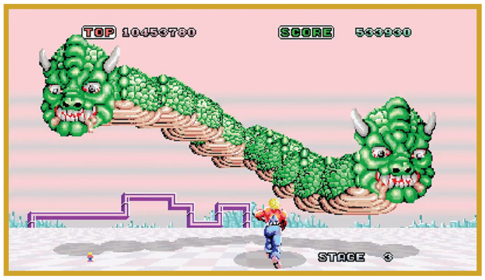
Now you're your own boss, working on Air Twister, a new game in the 3D shoot-'em-up genre you helped create with Space Harrier. What made you want to return to that genre now, and what are some of the things that make Air Twister different from your past works?
[In Air Twister], one princess, Princess Arch, stands up for her people to reclaim their planet from mechanized alien invaders. Along with the Guardians who serve the royal family, she battles against wave after wave of these mechanical creatures. The story centers around this main plot.

So even though the game looks like it's a reboot of Space Harrier, its premise and story are actually pretty different.
The premise for Space Harrier was largely born from the technical limitations of the time, and what game systems were possible on the hardware. Developing games back then required us to think deeply about each game's system, because creatively, everything had to be narrowed down to be able to work within those systems. Sometimes the limitations of the systems inspired ideas that we never would have had otherwise.

Originally, Space Harrier was planned to let you play as an actual air-to-ground airplane called a "Harrier" that can take off vertically, like a missile in an air strike. But the game boards at that time had such little memory. If you're playing a game about a real fighter plane, you want the plane to rotate cleanly, don't you? If so, then you need about 64 individual sprites to make the rotation animation look right. That would use up a lot of memory and require the plane to be really small on the screen. However, if it's a person, it doesn't look unnatural to have them move around the screen with just five frames. Using fewer frames means you can make the character much larger on the screen, while freeing up memory for all sorts of other things.

Space Harrier and OutRun used pseudo-3D, but they weren't real 3D. [Layered 2D background sprites scaling and animating toward the

AIR TWISTER CONTINUES WHAT YU SUZUKI STARTED WITH SPACE HARRIER, BUT IT'S NOT ALWAYS OLD-FASHIONED. IT HAS CINEMATIC CUTSCENES, LOCK-ON AIMING MECHANICS AND A MASSIVE, QUEEN-INSPIRED ROCK OPERA SOUNDTRACK BY A DUTCH COMPOSER KNOWN SIMPLY AS VALENSIA. THE ENTIRE GAME FEELS LIKE A CLASSIC '80S ALBUM COVER COME TO LIFE!



SPACE HARRIER

Originally released as an arcade machine in October 1985 in Japan (and just two months later in America), Space Harrier was the video game industry's first-ever 3D on-rails shooter. We wouldn't have gotten games like Star Fox or Panzer Dragoon without the example it set! The game is blissfully storyless: You're just a flying guy with a gun and your goal is to blast every enemy in sight. Check out its excellent Sega Ages port in the Switch eShop for $7.99!

player gave the illusion of a third dimension.] Back then I had been pursuing 3D for a long time, and making 3D-feeling games with 2D sprites is just one example of how I was able to express myself under the restrictions of that era. These days, though, it's relatively easy to develop in 3D, so I can finally create the 3D visuals that I always dreamed of.

Air Twister mixes Salvador Dali-style surrealism with otherworldly sci-fi monsters and familiar video game enemies like Moai heads. What feelings are you trying to illicit from players with the game? (And why are those darn Moai heads back?!)
Dali is one of my favorite painters and his work is an influence on me. And why the Moai? They hold a special place for me as a symbol of something that transcends time, watching the passing of the ages, and we portray them as such.

The world of Air Twister is a world filled with my favorite things, such as floating rocks and buildings, and alien cultures of the future that can manipulate anti-gravitational energy at will. I didn't really create this world because of what players would think of it — I just created the fantasy world that was in my head.

Arcade games used to be designed so just about anyone could pick up an play them. How did you try to keep that spirit of accessibility alive with Air Twister?
The first step is to make sure people can avoid punishment if they want. The bonus stages are all designed so that there is no way to lose points, so you can enjoy them stress-free. There are also some minigames that people can play in quick bursts to pass the time. [These include the "Fluffy" side game in which you play as a peaceful flying elephant sidescrolling in a 2D space, picking up stars and avoiding obstacles, as well as the "Tap Breaker" game in which you tap numbers from smallest to largest.]

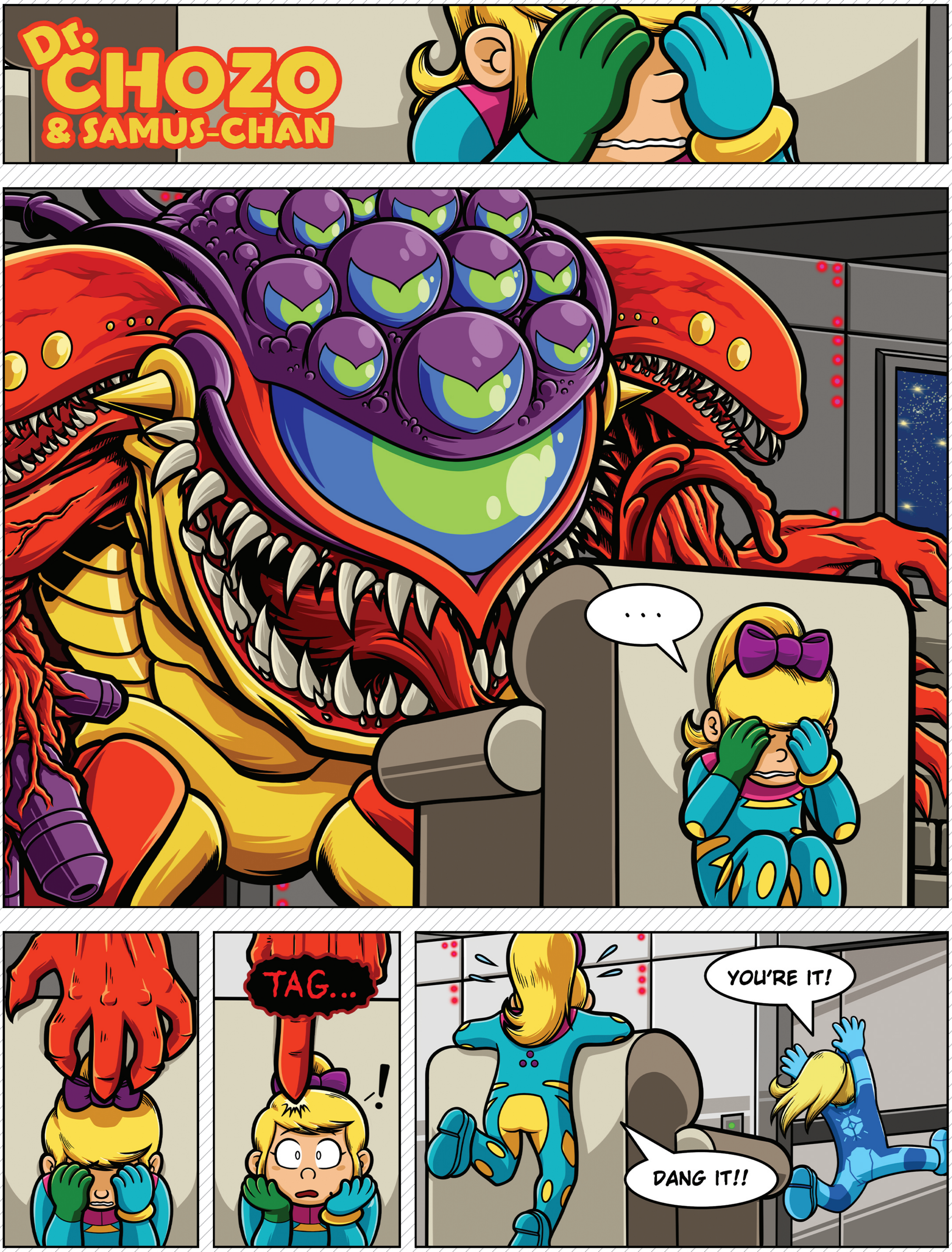
Of course, all of Air Twister and its various modes are pretty different from the classic arcade games I worked on. In the past, we made things that were simple but difficult, and that difficulty could push away a lot of first-time players. And there's nothing wrong with that. Those games were a lot of fun for people who weren't easily discouraged. But now we live in an era where you can choose from a huge number of games to suit your tastes, so overall, our games have to be more user-friendly than they were before. It's something I'm always considering.

Standards have definitely changed since the 1980s, but pixel art is as popular as ever, even with young people who have no nostalgia for the days when that's all that games could do. Yet Air Twister doesn't use pixel art at all. Do you have any fondness for pixel art, and do you think you'll ever make a new game that looks like one of your classic titles?
When it comes to pixel art, I go all the way back to the Apple II rather than the Sega Saturn or Nintendo's Famicom. There were only about 64 dots [with that computer], and the resolution was quite low, leading everything to have a rough, crude feel compared to what came after. But when the colors blurred just right, it looked beautiful. So if I wanted to relive the nostalgia of pixel art or re-experience those memories, I'd go back to the Apple II. Playing the first Ultima again, especially on a keyboard that is old and squeaky, is such a unique experience. It's a very special sound. It's very good. *(laughs)*

Is there a genre of game that you've never worked on before? And if so, what kind of game would you make in that genre if you could?
I have never done an online multiplayer game. As to what kind of game [in the genre I might want to make], something like a "last team standing co-op game" would be fun.

And to wrap up, if you could have any superpower, what would it be and why?
It's a teleport. *(laughs)*

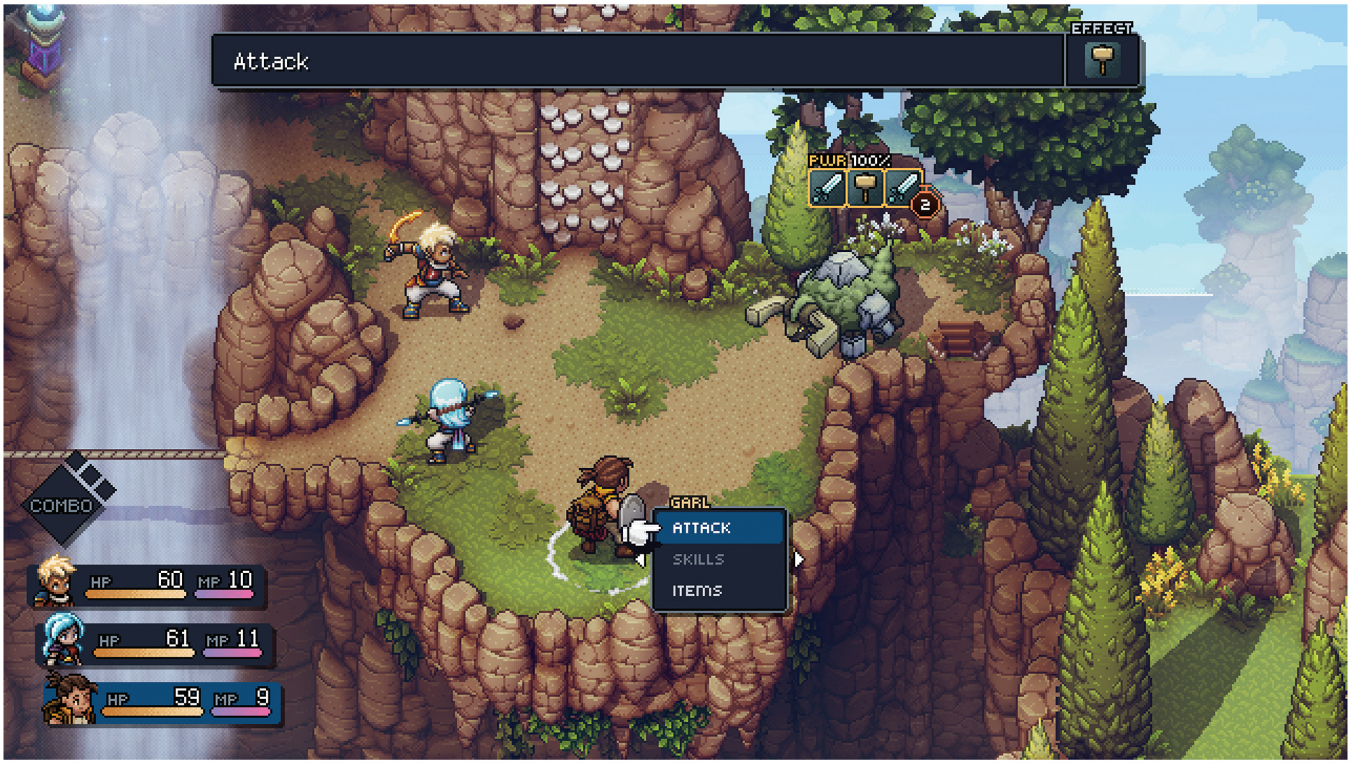
AIR TWISTER CONTAINS PLENTY OF VISUAL NODS TO YU SUZUKI'S PAST WORK: BOTH THESE GIANT MUSHROOMS AND GREY GEOMETRIC ENEMIES WERE FIRST SEEN IN SPACE HARRIER! LATER IN THE GAME, PRINCESS ARCH ALSO RIDES A VARIETY OF LARGE FANTASY ANIMALS, CARRYING ON A TRADITION THAT WAS BORN FROM HIS LOVE OF THE NEVERENDING STORY.



BY THOR THORVALDSON

REVIEWS

The long-awaited, heavily anticipated, indie-developed spiritual successor to **Chrono Trigger** has finally arrived . . . and it's better than we'd hoped! Turn the page to read our full review of the all-new **Sea of Stars**!



'90s RPG Style, Revived and Refined

SEA OF STARS

IN THE PANTHEON of legendary RPGs, the name Chrono Trigger looms large. That game was the result of an unprecedented team-up of some of the best game designers of the '90s, and its reputation as one of the finest examples of the genre has endured to this day. In the decades since its release, many games have tried to recapture its specific magic, but few, if any, have succeeded, including its own official follow-up, Chrono Cross. While Sea of Stars perhaps doesn't reach *quite* the same heights as Square's 16-bit classic, it comes closer than any other attempt I've ever seen.

Sea of Stars is a turn-based RPG that pulls from a number of inspirations ranging from the aforementioned Chrono Trigger to games like Golden Sun and even Super Mario RPG. But while it was clearly designed with Chrono Trigger at heart, calling it a clone would be doing it a terrible disservice.

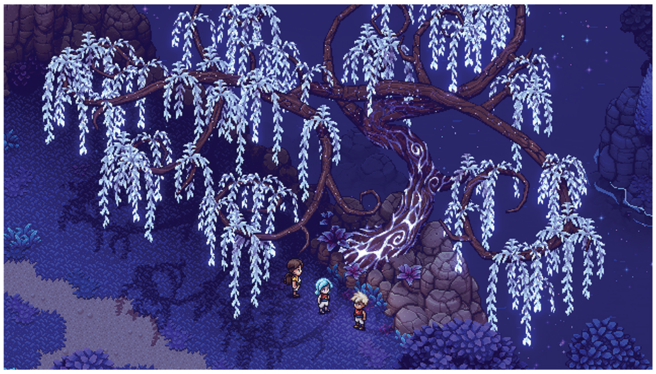
Like in Chrono Trigger, enemies can be seen wandering the environments, and interacting with them in any way triggers a battle sequence right there instead of transitioning to a separate battle area. There are no random encounters, and many battles can be avoided entirely if you're quick or stealthy enough. Characters can choose between your standard Attack, Magic or Item options, but there are also a number of combo moves where various party members can team up to perform unique attacks.

That's where the gameplay similarities between this and Chrono Trigger end, though, as Sea of Stars incorporates a number of modern RPG tropes as well. Combat relies heavily on timed hits for both offensive and defensive moves. These may not seem like a huge deal to get right at first, as they only add a marginal increase in damage when landed correctly, but they can radically alter the outcome of some tougher battles thanks to the game's "Lock" system.

During battle, enemies will occasionally display a series of icons called "locks" that show you how many of what type of attack you'll need to successfully land in order to prevent the enemy's offensive. So if they display two sword icons, a standard, single strike won't do the trick – but if you time an attack so it hits twice, you'll break the lock and avoid a potentially devastating situation.

The other major difference between this and Chrono Trigger is the number of environmental puzzles there are to solve. It never quite reaches the level of, say, a Zelda game, but Sea of Stars is rife with puzzles . . . which could be a big turn-off for those just looking for a traditional RPG experience. Some of the block-pushing puzzles in particular can get a bit tedious, but for the most part these are as clever as they are rewarding to solve, and I personally considered their inclusion largely a good thing – though I can see how they might frustrate some players.

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: SABOTAGE STUDIO RATING: E10+



But what likely won't turn anybody off is this game's presentation! So much of Sea of Stars is impossibly beautiful, featuring some truly breathtaking spritework. A lot has been said of Square's HD-2D visual design seen in games like Octopath Traveler, but for my money, this game's approach blows that out of the water. Everything about Sea of Stars' presentation is rooted in 16-bit RPGs, but is enhanced by a level of detail and impressive lighting and effects that could never have been pulled off on a Super NES. This is a jaw-droppingly gorgeous method of bringing a sprite-based game into the modern era. It maintains that retro feel, but in a strikingly modern way.

The same can be said for the game's expansive soundtrack. The songs feature a number of instruments that were pulled directly out of the Super NES' sound library, but they're used in conjunction with modern instruments to create a score that is unbelievably effective in every circumstance you encounter during your adventure.

But an RPG isn't an RPG without an epic story, and this is one area where Sea of Stars truly excels. It's impossible to detail the real story without delving into spoiler territory, but believe me when I say that this game goes places, many of which are very unexpected and extremely emotional. I'm not ashamed to admit that this game had me in literal tears at one point. I mean full-on ugly crying, something that has never happened to me before with a video game.

The basic premise more or less centers around three characters. Zale and Valere are two kids training to become Solstice Warriors: Zale has sun powers, and Valere has moon powers. Their best friend Garl has no powers, but is just about the nicest person on the planet, and a pretty darn good cook! There's an evil entity known as The Fleshmancer who is responsible for a number of horrible monsters called Dwellers that have been wreaking havoc around the world, and it's the job of the Solstice Warriors to keep said Dwellers in check. You'll visit towns, gain new party members, meet fascinating new characters, sail on a pirate ship, play an addictive board game called "Wheels" and explore wondrously beautiful locations, all steeped in astoundingly well-thought-out lore. The world of Sea of Stars is one that seems fairly by-the-numbers at first glance, but runs incredibly deep the more you learn.

Of course, this lore is also very much tied to Sabotage Studios' last game, The Messenger: It takes place in the distant past of that game's world. But while I would absolutely recommend playing through The Messenger regardless (it's a phenomenal game), it is by no means a requirement for enjoying or understanding Sea of Stars. There are numerous musical cues, environments and enemies that call back to The Messenger, which will undoubtedly excite fans, but not knowing that any of them are references to another game doesn't hinder this experience.

What does, though, unfortunately stop Sea of Stars from earning the 10/10 score I desperately want to give it: The story can drag on in a few spots, especially at the beginning where it can take a bit too much time to properly get going. There are a number of characters you meet throughout the course of the adventure that seem very important, but never get properly fleshed out (though the upcoming DLC might fix some of this), and the "post-game" content, while *very* well worth the effort, can get rather tedious and grinds the emotional impact of the story to a halt.

Traversal can also be an issue, especially again toward the end. There are a number of items you need to track down in specific areas, and there's no way to fast travel back to the world map, which can be a huge pain when the areas are so easy to get lost in thanks to a lack of a proper map system. There's even a late-game ability that seems tailor-made to solve this problem, but inexplicably doesn't.

These flaws do somewhat detract from the experience, but in the end, it's that intangible "feeling" that Sea of Stars absolutely nails that makes it well worth mentioning in the same breath as the legendary RPGs of old. Every inch of it was created with a level of love and reverence that shines through in every note of music, every frame of animation, every word of its script and every pixel of its environments. It's a masterpiece spun together by a team that was clearly truly inspired, making it a singular gaming experience that may not be perfect, but is so successful in nearly everything it sets out to do that it's not to be missed by anyone with even a passing interest in RPGs. **— KRIS**

9.5

GET PHYSICAL

While currently only available in the eShop in the States, Sea of Stars will get a Western physical release from iam8bit in early 2024. Not patient enough for that? You could import the Japanese version (which also includes English text). It launches in December!

Another Refurbished Factory

RUNE FACTORY 3 SPECIAL

MARVELOUS HAS BEEN on a nostalgia kick lately. After their release of their remakes of Story of Seasons: A Wonderful Life and Friends of Mineral Town, they've now decided to turn the clock back to the last decade, when Rune Factory 3 was released on the Nintendo DS (still with the subtitle "A Fantasy Harvest Moon") and bring it to modern consoles with a handful of facelifts and a few new features.

Along with the high-resolution graphics (although the upscaled backgrounds look fuzzy and weirdly out of proportion compared to the characters), there's an animated intro, updated dialogue, more voice acting and the ability to switch your difficulty level to give you a bigger challenge in dungeons. There's also the Newlywed Mode, which was first introduced in Rune Factory 4 Special, which takes you on a brief adventure with Micah and one of 11 eligible bachelorettes.

SWITCH
PUBLISHER: XSEED
DEVELOPER: MARVELOUS
RATING: T

The one thing that I feel could have really used some remastering was the music. It's bland and generic, and sticks in your head in the worst way.

While the story relies on the old tired cliché of the amnesiac main character stumbling into town and being given a vacant plot of farmland, the tale gets a twist by having that main character be able to transform into a golden-haired Wooly (the Rune Factory analogue to regular sheep in the Story of Seasons games). It's through his transformation that Micah attempts to broker peace between the human settlement of Sharance and the desert settlement where the last of the Univir race have isolated themselves to protect their way of life. Don't worry about traveling through monster-infested areas — this Wooly knows karate.

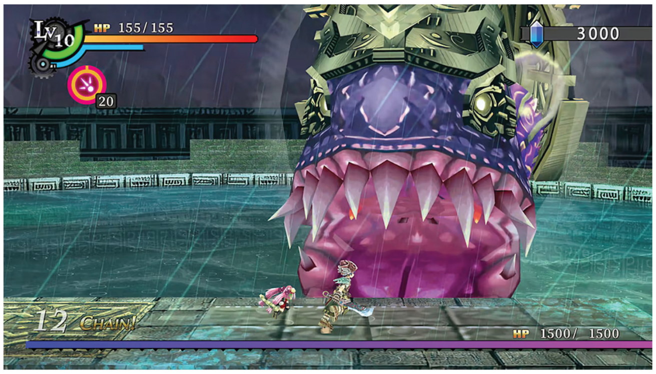
The character leveling system continues to be my favorite feature of all farming/action RPG hybrids I've played: Actions as simple as cooking food, harvesting crops or even walking around town contribute to your development as a capable fighter in the dungeons. However, one of the first things I discovered was how generous the game was — materials spawn on your unplowed fields at a fairly fast rate, and seeds drop from harvested crops and pulled weeds fairly regularly. I grew a ton of cucumbers on my farm in the summer before I wondered if changing the difficulty level would have any effect on my fields as well as monster fights. It doesn't feel game-breaking, but it did get a little tedious.

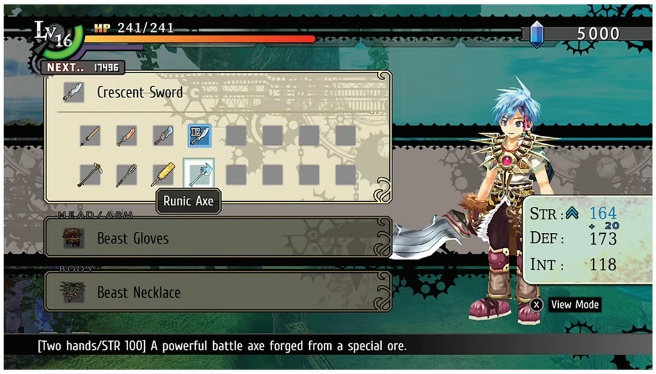
As for Micah's social life, it's kind of a step backwards from the marriage options in Rune Factory 4 Special or Rune Factory 5, since this game was originally made well before the developers thought about adding a female player character or same-sex options. At least the bachelorettes are somewhat interesting: a mermaid who wants to be a comedienne; a sleepy shopkeeper; an injection-obsessed witch-in-training; a rich girl who always means the opposite of what she says. The other characters you encounter in Sharance Village are also fairly memorable, but I wished that the Univir settlement in the desert had a higher population — or, at least, one you could understandably communicate with. Still, I thought the character development was done well, thanks to the myriad sidequests you could undertake, but I wished there was the opportunity to do more of them per day.

While I'm not the biggest Rune Factory fan, I still think this is a reasonably good update to a game that can be pricey on the secondhand market, but there are other (and better) options for those who really want to take their time with their farming sims. However, if you're looking for something that's a little less complicated than some more modern farming sims, and can be explored at a faster pace (and some lucky equipment drops!) then I'd recommend picking this up. **— REBECCA**

[DISCLOSURE: NF's own Nadia Oxford contributed to the localization for this release.]

7.5





A Different Kind of Trails Game

THE LEGEND OF NAYUTA: BOUNDLESS TRAILS

WHILE IT MAY have "Trails" in its title, The Legend of Nayuta: Boundless Trails forges a much different path than most entries in Nihon Falcom's long-running RPG franchise.

Rather than possess Trails series staples such as the turn-based AT Battle System and dialogue-heavy interconnected storylines, The Legend of Nayuta is a spin-off game that features action combat, platforming gameplay and a more streamlined tale, much like Falcom's other ongoing IP: the Ys series!

These key differences from other Trails games both help and hinder it as an overall experience for new and returning fans of the series. (It doesn't require any prior knowledge of the franchise, though. New fans can jump right in!)

The Legend of Nayuta tells the tale of Nayuta Herschel, a researcher who lives on the island of Remnant Isle. One day, a portal opens up to a new world called Lost Heaven; young hero Nayuta meets a pink twin-tailed fairy named Noi and becomes embroiled in a mission to save Lost Heaven from destruction.

It doesn't take long to become invested in this setting: Remnant Isle and Lost Heaven boast beautiful locales that pop with vibrant colors, and their seasons and environments change as you progress. The presentation looks fabulous on Switch, both in TV and Handheld Modes.

The characters of Remnant Isle and Lost Heaven also shine bright – especially Nayuta's spunky childhood friend Lyra, as well as Noi, who has an aversion to humans at first but tags along and ultimately becomes a close companion to Nayuta in his quest.

Nayuta and Noi as a pair provide the two building blocks of the game's exploration and combat. The world of Lost Heaven is comprised of stages, where you fight enemies, collect items and progress forward to get to temples, where the boss battles take place.

Combat combines weapon attacks from Nayuta and magical arts from Noi as you slash and sling spells at enemies. Noi also gains traversal abilities that allow you to navigate Lost Heaven in different ways, like Gear Drive, which allows you to run vertically up walls, and Gear Shield, which makes you immune to damage for a short period of time.

The Legend of Nayuta handles progression well. You gain Nayuta and Noi's abilities gradually, so you have time to get used to one before figuring out another. Then, the final stages and boss battles require you to put your entire arsenal to the test.

These were a few of the more frustrating aspects of the game for me, however. At some stages near the end, there were optional areas that I couldn't figure out how to reach, even after exhausting all my abilities. I'm no platforming pro, but it was discouraging to encounter that near the game's conclusion.

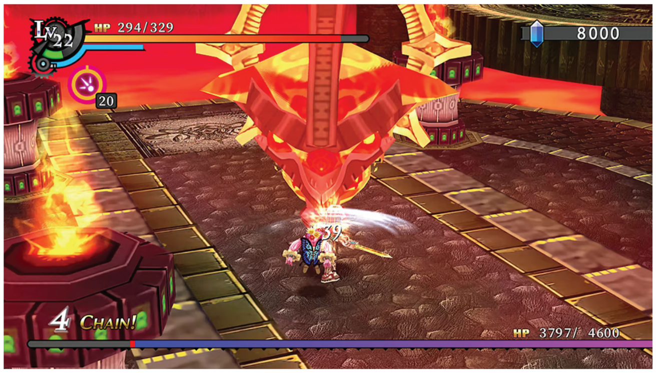
Another issue occurred during most of the boss battles: Noi's arts came in handy while navigating stages, but they were rendered mostly useless against bosses, with even the most powerful ones dealing only minimal damage compared to Nayuta's weapons. I found this odd because unlocking, upgrading and choosing which arts Noi should equip is a major mechanic in this game. It's devalued greatly if you can't count on them in boss fights, and it lessens the kinds of strategies you can use overall.

Despite having mixed feelings about the gameplay, I'm glad The Legend of Nayuta officially came West after more than a decade, especially due to its wholesome story and interesting connections that it may have to the Trails series. (I won't speculate here, but if you're a longtime Trails fan, don't skip this one.)

Not only is it fun as a standalone adventure for newcomers and series veterans, but if you've played all of the Trails games thus far, there are some juicy tidbits of lore to be found!
– MAGGIE

8.0

SWITCH
PUBLISHER: NIS AMERICA
DEVELOPER: NIHON FALCOM
RATING: E10+



Mousetroidvania

DISNEY ILLUSION ISLAND

PLAYERS OF A certain age may have fond memories of the many licensed Disney games from the 16-bit era, such as The Magical Quest Starring Mickey Mouse and Castle of Illusion. The leap in technology at the time allowed not just a refinement in design, but also an aspiration to achieve graphics that could be compared to the feature-level animation coming out of Disney's studios throughout the '90s. Flash forward a few decades and we've already seen many latter-day games pair full 2D animation with classic gameplay — Disney's been oddly absent during this digital renaissance, but is finally throwing their mouse ears back into the ring with Illusion Island.

This new Mickey game comes to us from Dlala Studios, the team behind the surprise 2020 reimagining of Battletoads. In a similar style, Disney Illusion Island presents itself as a playable cartoon, with fully animated cutscenes and impressively hand-animated sprites during gameplay. The visuals immediately feel informed by the recent Mickey Mouse shorts from animator Paul Rudish, but Dlala takes the character designs and tone in their own unique and sometimes cutely cynical direction.

The stage is set as Mickey, Minnie, Donald and Goofy arrive on the mysterious Monoth Island for a peaceful picnic. Their plans are immediately upended by small furry creatures called the Hokuns, as well as Toku, their impertinent leader. Toku tasks our heroes with tracking down the magical Tomes of Knowledge that have been stolen away to the far corners of the islands by three gigantic foes. It doesn't take much to figure out this framework acts as a MacGuffin to move the platforming and somewhat thin plot along, but this framing device may play to younger players who might not have encountered these tropes in fiction yet.

This feeling permeates through much of Illusion Island, honestly.

Surprisingly, the game is actually a Metroidvania, employing a sprawling interconnected map that becomes more traversable with the gradual acquisition of moves, including double jumps and ground pounds — cleverly presented as different tools for each character, like a pencil for Mickey, a bottle of mustard for Goofy and a cartoonish anvil for Donald. As far as this game is concerned, it acts as an extremely entry level introduction to these concepts and mechanics.

While smooth, gameplay *can* be painfully slow and omits any violence in favor of standard platforming puzzles. Players expecting a challenge in line with those retro Mickey classics may find themselves disappointed when playing solo . . . but the game may sincerely be best experienced as something for gamer parents to enjoy alongside their younger kids.

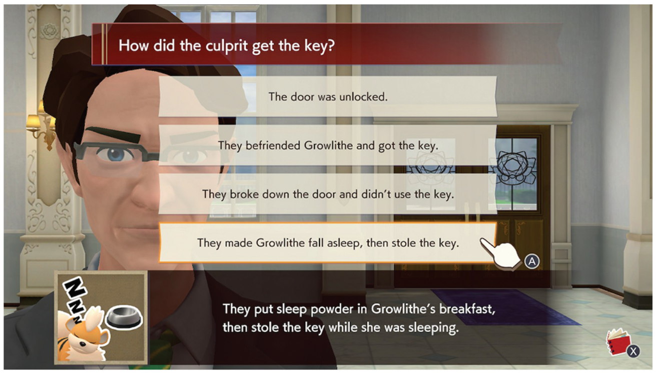
Co-op is here with support for up to four players, eschewing the chaos of other collaborative platformers and instead opting for a set of accessibility tools to provide support to partners who may often find themselves struggling. Players can lower a rope to allow characters to play catch-up or offer friendly hugs to fill health on the spot. If you've played with a younger kid before, you already know how much this sort of accommodation is appreciated.

So, if you *are* an experienced solo player, is there still anything here worth checking out? Possibly. While the game itself rarely turns up the heat on the platforming, a handful of the collectables offer some fun to be had for more skilled audiences. Most notably, Hidden Mickeys can be hunted across the, frankly, *gigantic* map and collectable pieces of Memorabilia hide some deep cut surprises for hardcore fans. (Finding props from Steamboat Willie was expected, but I certainly didn't anticipate collectables from the genuinely unhinged Potatoland short.)

Disney Illusion Island proves a bit too slow-paced, easy and familiar for seasoned veterans, despite its sometimes overwhelming sense of scale. However, if you're in the market for something to introduce to younger gamers in your home, you can probably add an extra point or two to this review score. The inventiveness and rhythm of classic Disney games like Magical Quest and Castle of Illusion aren't present, but what *is* here more than makes up for it with impressive visuals and pleasantly accessible co-op features for friends and families. **— JOHN-CHARLES**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: DISNEY E.C.
DEVELOPER: DLALA STUDIOS
RATING: E

6.5



Bolt of Boredom

DETECTIVE PIKACHU RETURNS

APPARENTLY IT DOESN'T take too much brain power to become a great detective.

The Detective Pikachu saga has received its second installment at long last. This story began in 2016 in Japan, came West on 3DS two years later, got a live-action film adaptation starring Ryan Reynolds a year after that . . . and then went silent. While the movie resolved the main mystery of young Tim Goodman's missing father before its credits rolled, the game left his fate unconfirmed – so players of that 3DS original have had to wait over half a decade to pick up where they left off.

Detective Pikachu Returns does just that, time-skipping ahead two years and reintroducing us to Tim and his talking Pikachu partner as they once again continue their quest to uncover the truth behind Tim's Dad's disappearance – and they seek this truth in the most mind-numbingly boring way possible.

SWITCH PUBLISHERS: NINTENDO & THE POKÉMON COMPANY
DEVELOPER: CREATURES RATING: E

This is a "walk around and press the A Button a bunch of times" game. It's utterly mindless nearly to the point of becoming maddening, as it almost constantly presents its players with "mysteries" to solve that are just the rock-bottom baseline of video game logic puzzles, all of which additionally have *painfully* obvious solutions placed in plain sight, right there on the screen, even while the characters chatter on and on in absurdly lengthy dialogue exchanges to "work out" the solutions. As I do with most games I review, I had my kids positioned on the couch to observe the proceedings as I played, and Carter was literally slapping himself on the forehead with how stupid these "detectives" were to not see each puzzle's answer in less than three seconds. It's insultingly dumb.

So, OK, it's just a game not meant for adults with fully formed minds then, right? But it can't be played by the youngest of Pokémon fans either, since its gameplay is built on reading hundreds, if not thousands, of boxes of dialogue. So I can't just pass this over to my younger boys who don't know how to read yet. I guess that gives the game a razor-thin target audience of elementary-age kids who can read its endless onslaught of words, but who might also take more than a single minute to parse the pathetic puzzles? That's a hard sell.

Negativity out of the way for just a moment, I will offer some praise for the presentation, as the fully voice-acted cutscenes are genuinely entertaining. Detective Pikachu remains a winsomely comical character, with his gruff voice clashing with his cartoony cuteness – and I was actually interested to see what really had happened to Tim's father Harry. so the scenes that moved that story along were engaging.

There are also a few Pokémon team-up moments that do offer some variety to the gameplay, like riding around on Growlithe to sniff along scent trails, or hopping on a Galarian Darmanitan and then punching big chunks of ice out of the pathway. But even those sequences are *super* slow.

Most aggravating was the lack of any kind of reward for completing the game's tasks! You'll clear sidequests and then just get *nothing* for your efforts. Seriously. They could've had a concept art gallery, or different hats for Pikachu, or something. You don't even always get a simple thank you!

Detective Pikachu Returns is dull and exceedingly easy. Its real challenge is staying awake long enough to see its story through – as after an hour or two of interrogating witnesses to help Tim and Pikachu solve a crime that you, the player, already figured out in the first five minutes, you'll be hitting your Home Button to retreat back to your Switch Menu, searching for something else to play. **– LUCAS**

Xenoblade's Predecessors

BATEN KAITOS I & II HD REMASTER

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: BANDAI NAMCO RATING: T

NINTENDO DROPPED THE ball with the RPG genre.

That's a topic we've touched on in NF's pages in the past, but it merits mentions once more here in this RPG-focused issue – and especially so to give you all proper context for this review. So, let's review!

The SNES era was an RPG golden age, as the genre soared to stratospheric heights on the strength of hits like Final Fantasy III, Chrono Trigger and Secret of Mana. It gave rise to RPGs that became cult classics in the years that followed, like EarthBound, and Nintendo even recognized the growing popularity of role-playing enough to greenlight the creation of the original Super Mario RPG.

But, somewhere in the transition between the SNES and Nintendo 64 hardware generations, RPG support on Nintendo's side of the industry almost entirely evaporated. The N64 library held almost no RPGs at all, as the companies who were creating them had fled to Sony's PlayStation and its cheaper-to-manufacture and more content-packable CD media. The Big N's refusal to abandon cartridges resulted in RPG fans abandoning the Big N.

Things slowly began to turn around in the GameCube era, as a few studios saw how RPG-starved the Nintendo loyalists had become . . . finally leading to the launch of games like the original Baten Kaitos.

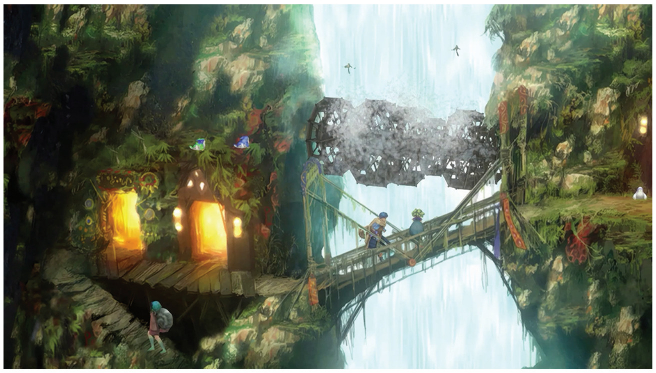
Baten Kaitos: Eternal Wings and the Lost Ocean launched in Japan in late 2003 and one year later in America. It was an inventive RPG adventure that retained the turn-based combat most commonly seen in the genre, but then discarded traditional menu options like Fight, Magic and Items in order to swap in a more chaotic card-based system of move selection. It wasn't a massive hit, but attracted enough attention from RPG aficionados that Nintendo took notice. They then took over publishing duties for its sequel, Baten Kaitos Origins . . . but that was a little too little, a little too late. Origins ended up being the last first-party Cube game released by NOA before the Wii launch just two months later.

Probably like many Nintendo fans of that time, I played the first Baten Kaitos but skipped the second – my attention was just too focused on the November '06 debut of a brand-new system (and Twilight Princess) to pay any mind to a September '06 last-minute RPG launch for the outgoing GameCube. Happily, though, that's resulted in one half of this two-game HD Remaster collection feeling totally fresh and new now that I've come around to trying it out, 17 years later!

Baten Kaitos I & II HD Remaster is an impressive repackaging of two titles that should have gotten more attention than they did two decades ago. These games have been upgraded both in the quality-of-life department and on the visual front.

They look beautiful! Honestly, I said "Wow!" as soon as I kicked off my encore run of Baten Kaitos I, as each of its environments truly pops in high-definition clarity. Other RPGs from around this same era, like Chrono Cross, have looked fine with their modern re-releases – but Baten Kaitos is ranking in on a higher tier of visual refinement. Its prerendered environments must have been saved and preserved at an exceptionally high resolution by forward-thinking developers 20 years in the past to make these scenes possible today.

Speaking of the developers, most NF readers will know the name Monolith Soft due to their work on the ongoing Xenoblade series. Well, years before that franchise began, the two Baten Kaitos games were what many of those same creators were working on. If you're a Xenoblade devotee who's already cleared all the many stories of that series that have been released on the Switch, you'd serve yourself well to dive into these titles and dig up some of that saga's roots.



The first Baten Kaitos focuses on a guy who's kind of a jerk named Kalas. He's on a quest for revenge and many of his choices of both words and actions are decidedly non-heroic. Some players are turned off by that; I kind of like following the journey of someone who's not a by-the-book goody-two-shoes though. Maybe Kalas was meant to be a riff on "callous"? Or maybe's that coincidental. Anyway, he kind of accidentally helps to unleash an ancient evil back into the world, and then gets swept up into fixing that mistake while also hunting down the man who murdered his family. Fun!

The second game starts somewhat similarly, in that primary protagonist Sagi is introduced as part of a team of killers. He actually is a good guy at heart, though, so you get invested in wanting him to earn his redemption when he's framed for an assassination that he didn't commit!

Both Kalas and Sagi are Spiriters, in that they both have the ability to break the fourth wall and carry on conversations with you, the player, directly. They'll ask for your input and advice, and you can either agree with what they want to do or try to redirect them. It's a unique narrative dynamic that more RPGs should implement!

The card-based combat takes some getting used to, and can be frustrating if you don't go into it with the proper mindset: Your success or failure is often all up to the luck of the draw. You may get powerful attack cards when you need them! Or you may get no healing cards when your HP's nearing zero.

Baten Kaitos I is clunkier and more slow-paced, as it constantly stops the action to show you a results screen after every single turn. I kind of like that, though, as it lets you play more casually. Origins streamlines the fights to feature continuous action from start to finish, so things do move along more quickly, but are also harder to handle mentally. You'll only have a few quick seconds to select your cards and create combos in both games, and building a balanced deck in the menu between battles is critical.

If you want to ignore all that, though? You can! The best added features here let you turn off battles or activate infinite damage, making combat a total cakewalk – that way you can just focus on exploration and experiencing the story. I wouldn't recommend new players cut out such a major part of the Baten Kaitos style of play right away, but veterans who just want to revisit these tales and see them play out again in gorgeous HD could feel free to let the cards deal with themselves!

– LUCAS

8.0

Elephants on Parade

SUPER MARIO BROS. WONDER

I WAS WRONG about the elephants.

I inked my pachyderm prediction into last issue's preview, and it turned out to be totally off-target: Since the first trailer for Super Mario Bros. Wonder that showed off the Elephant Mario transformation did not include any footage off him jumping in that form, I guessed that Elephant Mario might not be able to jump at all! Kind of like the overburdened Captain Toad.

Well, it's a good thing I didn't bet any money on that, because not only can Mario's Elephant form jump, but he's got just as much lift in his legs as when he doesn't weight two tons! He's a perfectly fine jumper after all. I should have known that just because Mario's been transformed into the Elephant Man, that wouldn't ever stop him from also continuing to be video gaming's original Jumpman.

. . . It gets worse. I also expressed my opinion that Mario should be the only character in the cast to become an elephant, while the others could get different animal forms instead. Had I put a little more thought into that, I would have realized how unlikely that would be. Super Mario Bros. Wonder includes a whole lot of crazy gameplay sequences, but if it also asked players to keep unique power-ups in mind for every one of its dozen playable characters, casual players would surely turn up their noses. A super-heavy, non-jumping elephant transformation would make sense in a game like Super Mario Odyssey, where Mario's the only hero and only solo players would be dealing with it. Here, though? Elephants all around was really the only way this could have gone.

(I'll update the prediction-forming portion of my brain for next time.)

The elephants have another element! Their elongated noses can swipe at enemies (which we did see in the first trailer, just briefly), but those prominent proboscises also serve as gardening tools! You can fill up an Elephant-ized character's trunk with water anywhere that water can be touched in the environment, and then spray that water back out in front of you to bring withered flowers back to life, or just get your enemies all damp and grumpy. The latter is mostly for fun, but the former is key in several situations – rehydrating certain plants is the only way to activate and then interact with them, which often triggers the appearance of the new Wonder Coins or the world-changing Wonder Flower itself.

That's where the aforementioned "crazy gameplay sequences" make their appearance. Most of this game's levels begin simply, as standard running and jumping challenges the likes of which we've seen from this series for over 38 years. But when you find and touch a Wonder Flower, some insane shift in the stage instantly takes place! Gravity might invert itself, or your characters might find their bodies shapeshifted on the spot. The environment might warp around them, or a stampede of enemies might suddenly charge into the scene, or some normally tiny foes might get supersized, forcing you to deal with a boss-tier foe out of nowhere! There's no telling what Wonders may happen!

. . . That's only if you actually find the Wonder Flower, though. One thing that's surprised me about playing Super Mario Bros. Wonder so far is that it's entirely possible, even common, to just skip past the game's titular selling point in many stages. Some levels have the Wonder Flower just floating in plain sight – others require you to dig around, explore and investigate a bit to uncover it. So if you're just speedrunning through (or if you have kids who are too impatient to poke around the environment), you'll miss out on many of this game's best moments.

Other early impressions: I love the variety in the playable characters! The main seven all handle the same: Mario, Luigi, Peach, Daisy, Toadette and both the Blue and Yellow Toads all share the same stats/jump height/etc. But they each have unique animations and voices that will prompt some players to pick one over another. (I've enjoyed playing as Daisy the most, just for the fact that this is her debut in the mainline series!) The four Yoshis are also a joy, as they bring in their species' long, enemy-grabbing tongue,

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: NINTENDO RATING: E

as well as the signature flutter jump that gives players a little more leeway in clearing big pits safely. They've been reanimated too, with a new goofy "mouthful" look when they've swallowed a foe – and they can even pick up and carry Koopa Shells and the like with their arms! Not every object has to be eaten to be moved any more!

Other notable differences: The Yoshis can't take damage from foes, and they can't use any power-ups. (So no Elephant Yoshi, I'm afraid.) Nabbit rounds out the cast as another invulnerable option mostly meant for younger players, but I could see adults choosing to use him too. It's the variety that's key. The replay value! You could clear this whole game's quest 12 times and never have to use the same hero twice!

All that said, I'm quite a ways away from rolling the credits in Super Mario Bros. Wonder even once. Because of the timing of the game's release and when we had to send this issue off to be printed, I've only had a few short hours with the final game as of this writing, so all of this so far has just been my first impressions. I'll finish the quest in the weeks ahead and then finish this review in our next issue, once I've seen everything the game has to offer and can confidently render a final judgment on it all!

Though I suppose I could make some predictions for what I think the rest of the game has in store, now that I've played just a bit of it . . . just kidding! I'll take a break from playing guessing games for a while, to spare you all the secondhand embarrassment you've surely been struck with after reading my terribly off-target speculations in the past. But hey, I did get pretty close with a lot of the Tears of the Kingdom stuff earlier this year. Make sure you remember the times I get things right – because elephants never forget! **– LUCAS**

IN PROGRESS

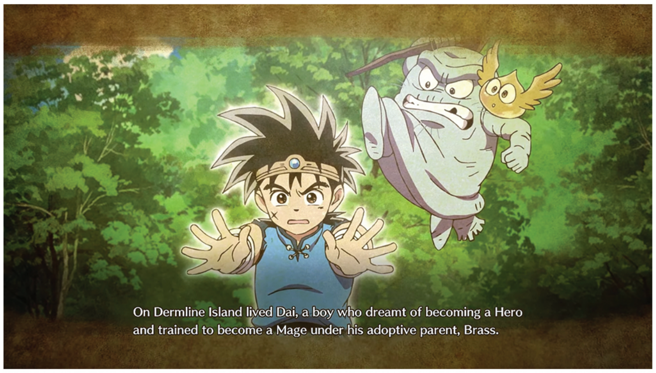
I Guess I'll Dai Another Day

INFINITY STRASH: DRAGON QUEST - THE ADVENTURE OF DAI

I DON'T HAVE the patience to play this.

One of the common characteristics of RPGs that didn't make the cut for our ABCs article earlier is how much time you need to invest to see them through to the end. We considered it for "H" as "Hours Spent" – or it could have landed on "D" or "W" or "M" for "Days" or "Weeks" or even "Months." RPGs often demand that much.

The best ones are worth it! It feels so satisfying to deeply immerse yourself in a world and its story – to get to know a cast of characters and follow along with their trials and their triumphs, even as you're also walking through your own challenges in your everyday life, throughout that same long stretch of days or weeks or months. RPGs can truly offer a more lasting escape than any other games.



. . . And yet.

Great RPGs demand a lot of your time, yes, but they also respect all of the time you invest, giving you meaningful story progression, engaging gameplay or both every time you sit down with them. Bad RPGs, on the other hand, offer only repetitive, dull gameplay, and surround it with story that either never progresses or isn't interesting enough to make you care about it even if it does.

Are you picking up any of these hints I'm dropping so far?

Infinity Strash: Dragon Quest - The Adventure of Dai is just nowhere near worth the amount of time it asks you to invest in it. This game is ponderous. Padded out. So profoundly boring that I quite honestly caught myself nodding off while I sat and waited for one of its 10,000 different cutscenes to finally finish playing, so that I could get back to actually playing it myself!

The game at least gives you an accurate first impression, so you'll know what you're getting into after just the first hour has gone by – since, within that first hour, you'll only get to take direct control of the playable hero for *maybe* five minutes.

All the rest of the opening is spent reading a dozen different tutorial screens explaining the function of every different button you could possibly press (before you're allowed to actually take real control and press any of them) or else just sitting still and watching cutscenes. Cutscenes upon cutscenes upon yet more, yes, cutscenes.

Sometimes the game takes you to a world map so you can have something different to look at – after that, it's back to watching cutscenes.

I just don't get it. What were they thinking? Who wants to do this?

OK, OK, some more context here. This game is an adaptation of an anime series – it purports to take its players through the events of the first 41 episodes of Dragon Quest: The Adventure of Dai, which is a real show that you could watch right now on either Crunchyroll or Hulu. And I recommend you do that much more than I can recommend you play this game.

SCREENSHOTS TAKEN FROM VARIOUS VERSIONS

Because this game just *is* the show – but a far worse version! The many, *many* different cutscenes here are just chopped-up bits of the anime's episodes – still screenshots of scenes are displayed while characters talk over the top of them. And, sure, I can see the logic in doing some of that just to catch people up on the story. It is an anime tie-in game, I know. But the scenes just *don't stop.* I really had no idea why I was continuing to sit through it when I could've just gone to watch the actual show.

So, then, who is this even for? If someone is coming in as an established fan of the show and they've already seen all of these episodes, they're going to be frustrated at having to sit through so many scenes that they've already seen. And for anyone who is a newcomer, like me? You're just getting tortured by having to watch a butchered version.

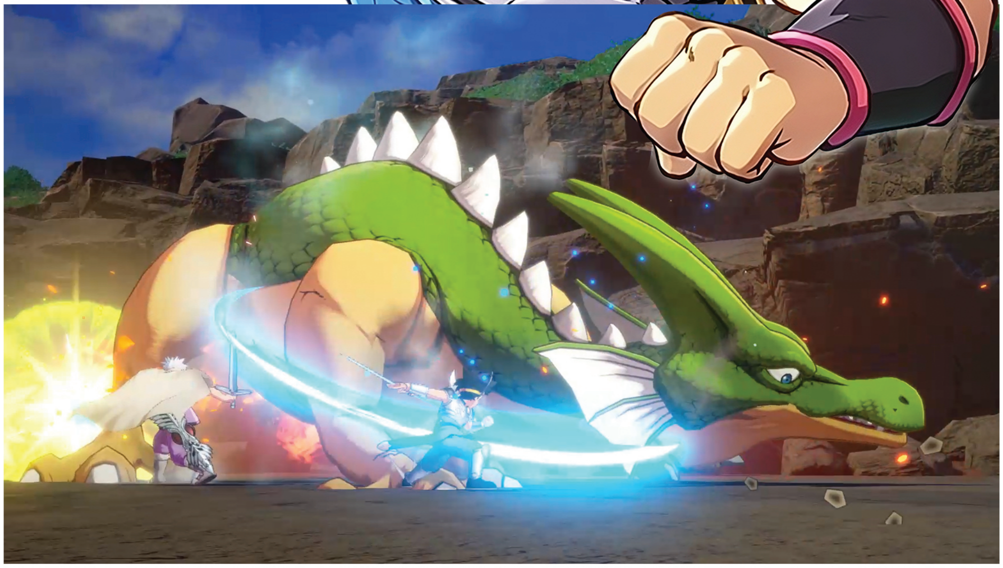
Some of the cutscenes actually are animated, in-engine, and those I will grant are pretty great. Because the game's graphics are wonderful . . . when you're actually allowed to see them!

When you do finally get to play the game, though, its action does not feel like it was worth the wait. This is an arena fighter best described as "bland."

You mash attacks and spells, move and dodge, occasionally block and charge up meters to unleash flashy special moves . . . then rinse and repeat that over and over again. It's similar to the Warriors/Musou games in a way – they're repetitive too – but they at least give you vast battlefields to run across and hundreds of foes to destroy. This game gives you small spaces with handfuls of enemies, and often just one at a time – singular boss encounters are overly frequent.

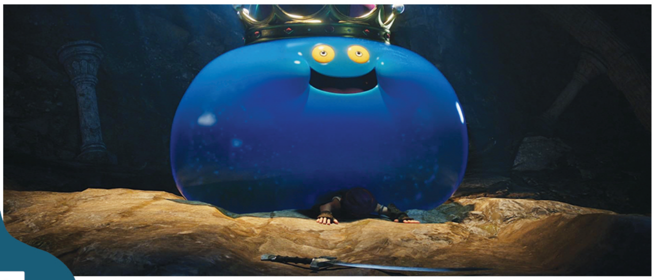
I do like that the game offers more than one playable hero, and that you can switch between them on the fly. *And* that they all play differently. I'll give credit where it's due in that regard. But man, it's so hard to want to keep digging through so much muck to unearth the few gems this game has to offer!

The Adventure of Dai was originally a manga all the way back in 1989, when Dragon Quest was just getting started. It had one anime adaptation in the early '90s, and just a few years ago got a second, which is what this game is based on. Dai's story is such a venerable part of Dragon Quest history that I was honestly excited to play this game – even if its release snuck up on me, so we hadn't run any preview coverage of it in past issues. Turns out that that's just as well, though, because I would've felt bad if I'd gotten anyone else needlessly hyped for it ahead of time! Don't give this game any of your time. Watch the show if you want. That's enough. **– LUCAS**



5.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER: SQUARE ENIX
DEVELOPERS: SQUARE ENIX, GAMESTUDIO & KAI GRAPHICS RATING: T



7.5

Removed from the Watch List at Last

DRAGON QUEST: YOUR STORY

SHORTLY AFTER FIRING up Dragon Quest XI S again to begin to present its unique set of monsters to my boys, I happened to remember that I'd never gotten around to watching the Dragon Quest movie. So, to continue their introduction to this classic RPG franchise – as well as to satisfy my own curiosity – I selected it to be the focus of our next Friday Family Movie Night.

And, shortly after doing that, I also happened to remember that the reception for this film was pretty poor when it first came out.

Dragon Quest: Your Story is a CG-animated film that adapts the tale of Dragon Quest V: Hand of the Heavenly Bride. That's one of the series' sequels that we never got in the States in its original form – we had to wait until the 2009 DS remake to be able to play it in English for the first time (officially). So we American fans of this franchise, overall, have less nostalgia for that specific sequel – whereas in Japan it's been one of the series' most beloved installments for decades.

It's that long-lasting passion for this tale that sent Japanese fans' expectations soaring sky high when this movie was announced . . . and what caused it to kind of crash and burn in the court of public opinion there with some of the decisions its filmmakers made.

For starters, the art style they selected erases a lot of the appeal of Akira Toriyama's original art for these characters and creatures. It doesn't look too terrible, but it's just a weird creative decision to try to distance your film visually from the fan-favorite art style that other Toriyama-led brands like Dragon Ball have embraced for decades. Heck, Dragon Ball's most recent movie figured out how to replicate Toriyama's style and still have its characters be 3D models! (That needs a bit more work, but still.)

The adaptation of the story here also goes wildly off the rails in the film's final few minutes, as (spoiler warning) the movie suddenly stops being a straight-forward retelling of the game's fantasy story and injects truly bizarre elements of the "real world" into the narrative out of nowhere. Sometimes that kind of thing can be fun – it was enjoyable when The LEGO Movie broke away from its animation to feature a few live-action sequences starring Will Ferrell – but the whiplash of Dragon Quest yanking away the in-game immersion after 95% of the runtime has already elapsed is truly bizarre.

I guess it was meant to let nostalgic Japanese fans feel like they, the players, were a part of the story themselves? They subtitled it "Your Story" after all. But then those fans reportedly hated that sequence, so it seems like including it was a bad call.

Besides the odd ending, the movie is fine family-friendly fare. It's a generational adventure, as it begins with a son learning how to be a hero from his warrior father. Then the son grows up and becomes an accomplished adventurer in his own right before meeting and marrying his bride, who soon gives birth to their son . . . who then also takes up the role of sword-wielding hero. It's three generations of Hero for the price of one! (Though do be warned there is a "Mufasa" moment of the first father sacrificing himself that could freak out some kids.)

Dragon Quest: Your Story was added to Netflix in the States four years ago, so this has been a rather late review – but if you've also let it sit in "My List" ever since 2019 and you're also getting yourself back into a more role-playing mood, maybe finally fire it up for your own next movie night. **– LUCAS**

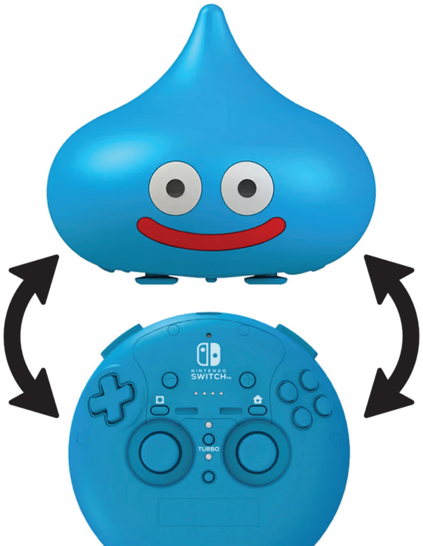
MOVIE DISTRIBUTED BY: NETFLIX PRODUCTION BY: SQUARE ENIX & TOO MANY OTHERS TO PRINT A FULL LIST HERE RATING: PG

ARCHIVE

The complete list of Nintendo Force retail reviews from the last two years. Scores reflect individual reviewers' opinions.

SWITCH

TITLE	SCORE	REVIEWER	ISSUE
Ace Angler: Fishing Spirits	6.5	Rebecca	#63
Advance Wars 1+2: Re-Boot Camp	9.5	Lucas	#65
AEW: Fight Forever	7.0	David	#67
AI: The Somnium Files – nirvanA Initiative	8.0	Tony	#62
Atari 50: The Anniversary Celebration	9.5	Kris	#64
Atelier Ryza 3: Alchemist of the End & The Secret Key	9.0	Thor	#67
Atelier Sophie 2: The Alchemist of the Mysterious Dream	8.0	Maggie	#59
Bayonetta 3	9.0	Jonathan	#63
Bayonetta Origins: Cereza and the Lost Demon	8.0	Jonathan	#65
Big Brain Academy: Brain vs. Brain	8.0	Kris	#58
Blue Reflection: Second Light	8.5	Maggie	#57
Bugsnax	8.5	Lucas	#61
Capcom Fighting Collection	9.0	Jonathan	#61
ConnecTank	7.5	Lucas	#67
Cris Tales	6.5	Maggie	#57
Cruis'n Blast	8.0	David	#56
Digimon Survive	8.0	Maggie	#63
DNF Duel	8.0	Sean	#66
Double Dragon Gaiden: Rise of the Dragons	8.0	Kris	#67
Dragon Ball Z: Kakarot	6.0	Kris	#56
Dragon Quest Treasures	8.0	Matthew T.	#64
Everybody 1-2-Switch!	7.5	Kris	#67
Fire Emblem Engage	8.5	Rebecca	#64
Fire Emblem Warriors: Three Hopes	8.0	Rebecca	#61
Harvestella	8.0	Nadia	#63
Hot Wheels Unleashed	7.5	Lucas	#56
JoJo's Bizarre Adventure: All-Star Battle R	6.5	Tony	#62
Kirby and the Forgotten Land	10	Lucas	#59
Kirby's Return to Dream Land Deluxe	9.0	Lucas	#65
LEGO Star Wars: The Skywalker Saga	9.0	Thor	#59
LIVE A LIVE	8.5	Rebecca	#61
Loop8: Summer of Gods	6.0	Maggie	#66
Mario + Rabbids Sparks of Hope	9.0	Lucas	#63
Mario Party Superstars	8.5	Lucas	#57
Mario Strikers: Battle League	7.5	Lucas	#60
Master Detective Archives: Rain Code	7.0	Matthew T.	#67
Mega Man Battle Network Legacy Collection	8.0	David	#65
Metroid Dread	9.0	Tony	#56
Metroid Prime Remastered	10	Lucas	#64
MLB The Show 22	8.5	Dan	#59
NERF Legends	4.0	Lucas	#57
Ni no Kuni II: Revenant Kingdom – Prince's Edition	8.5	Brett	#56
Nickelodeon All-Star Brawl	7.5	Brett	#56
Nickelodeon Kart Racers 3: Slime Speedway	8.0	David	#63
Octopath Traveler II	8.5	Rebecca	#65
Pac-Man Museum+	8.5	Kris	#60
Pac-Man World Re-Pac	7.5	Lucas	#62
Pikmin 4	10	Lucas	#67
Pokémon Brilliant Diamond	6.5	Rebecca	#57
Pokémon Legends: Arceus	9.0	Lucas	#58
Pokémon Scarlet	8.5	Lucas	#63
Pokémon Shining Pearl	6.0	Lucas	#57
Pokémon Violet	8.5	Lucas	#63
Puzzle Bobble Everybubble!	8.0	Jonathan	#67
Rain on Your Parade	8.0	Lucas	#65
Record of Lodoss War: Deedlit in Wonder Labyrinth	8.0	Jonathan	#60
Rune Factory 5	7.5	Maggie	#59
Shin Megami Tensei V	8.0	Meghan	#57
Sonic Colors: Ultimate	5.0	Kris	#58
Sonic Frontiers	7.0	Tony	#64
Sonic Origins Plus	8.0	Tony	#67
Splatoon 3	9.0	Lucas	#62
Story of Seasons: A Wonderful Life	7.0	Rebecca	#67
Super Monkey Ball: Banana Mania	8.5	David	#56
Taiko no Tatsujin: Rhythm Festival	8.0	J.-Charles	#63
Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Shredder's Revenge	10	Lucas	#60
Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: The Cowabunga Collection	9.0	David	#62
The Caligula Effect 2	8.0	Maggie	#58
The Legend of Heroes: Trails from Zero	9.0	Maggie	#62
The Legend of Heroes: Trails into Reverie	10	Maggie	#67
The Legend of Heroes: Trails to Azure	10	Maggie	#65
The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom	10	Lucas	#66
Theatrhythm Final Bar Line	9.0	J.-Charles	#65
Triangle Strategy	9.0	Nadia	#59
WarioWare: Get It Together!	7.5	Rebecca	#56
We Love Katamari REROLL + Royal Reverie	9.5	Jonathan	#66
Wunderling DX	8.0	Lucas	#64
Xenoblade Chronicles 3	10	Maggie	#62



REVIEW REMINDER
DRAGON QUEST XI S: ECHOES OF AN ELUSIVE AGE – DEFINITIVE EDITION

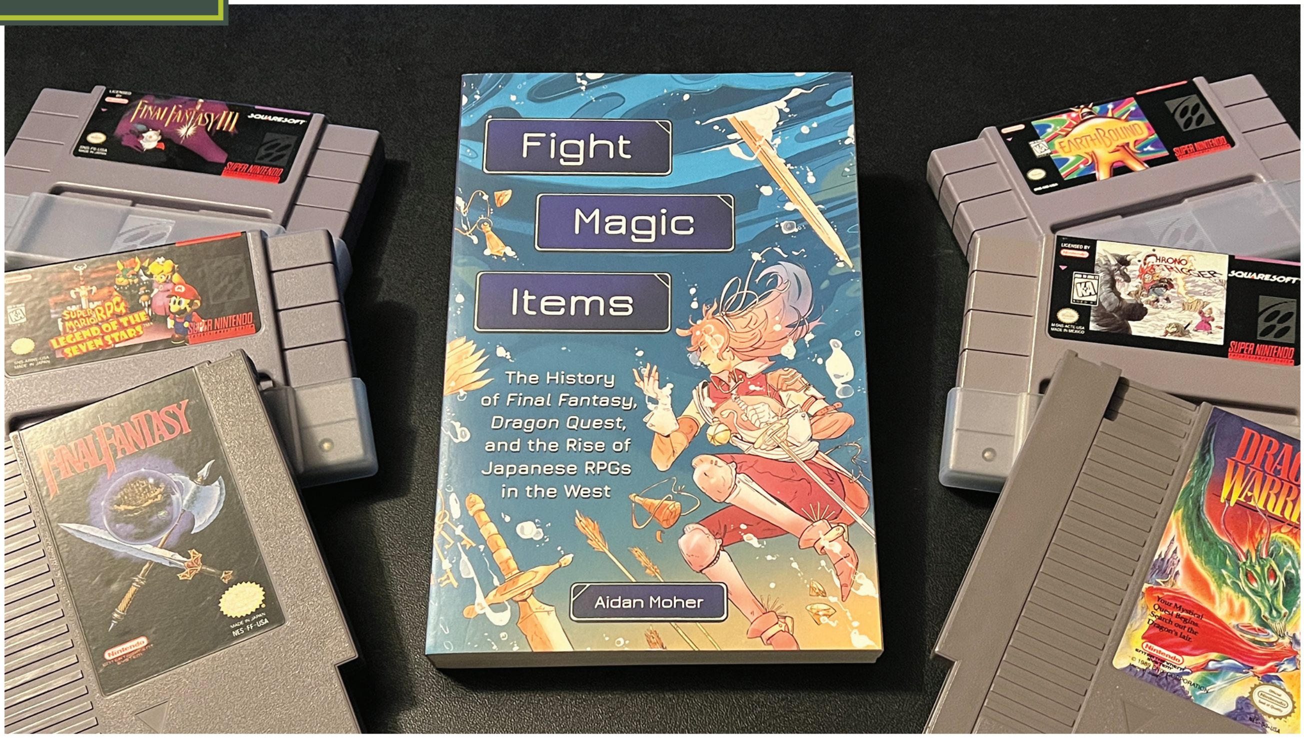
IF WE'VE DONE our job with this issue, we've been able to convince at least a few of you to give RPGs an honest try! If that few includes you, then I'd suggest jumping in with the new Super Mario RPG first (to just go ahead and let it do its job as an introductory experience), and then, if you're still hungry for more after that, consider next taking on Dragon Quest XI S!

We loved this game so much that we named it our Game of the Year for 2019! Dragon Quest XI S: Echoes of an Elusive Age - Definitive Edition really has it all: a colorful cast of characters, a classic and nostalgic story that hits all the right notes, a grand world to explore and much, much more.

I mentioned earlier in this issue that I've recently begun to replay this game from the beginning, in order to introduce its world (and its vast cast of silly creatures) to my kids. And it's been an excellent choice for that kind of "parent plays, kids watch" game time – so if you've got young ones at home and you've already run through every episode of Bluey multiple times, do consider this Quest as something new to put on the TV and share together with them.

I will echo one old complaint from my Echoes of an Elusive Age review four years ago: The music is just too repetitive. I think Square Enix recognized that, which is why they added the option to swap in the Dragon Quest VIII overworld music just to break up the monotony of XI's main theme a bit. I also think they didn't want to offend Koichi Sugiyama by having anyone else step in to do XI's music, when really he should have had some assistance. His personal views being so weirdly problematic just muddied the whole experience even more, as did his death in 2021 . . . it's kind of a musical mess. But, as I said back then, that is just one blemish on what is otherwise a perfectly wonderful, must-play RPG!

Also, I've been playing it this time using the Hori Dragon Quest Slime controller, which was a splurge purchase, but it just makes me smile! **– LUCAS**



BOOK REVIEW

An Overview of the History of RPGs

Level up your knowledge of the role-playing genre with Fight, Magic, Items.

I MADE IT into a bibliography.

I didn't know that before buying this book; it was simply a happy surprise. I actually didn't discover it until I was a few chapters deep into reading, too, when curiosity struck and I flipped to the back of the book just to scan the list of names and links and references. Sure enough: "Thomas, Lucas M."

I was credited for my IGN review of the Wii Virtual Console re-release of Final Fantasy: Mystic Quest, written almost exactly 13 years ago in October 2010. My younger self (still in his 20s, bless his heart), described that entry-level role-playing experience as, and I quote, "a dud."

Well, 29-year-old me wasn't wrong.

Mystic Quest was a game that the Final Fantasy creators created specifically for the American audience – an audience that, they assumed, was full of absolute morons. It was painfully simplistic, trying to ease uninitiated players into RPG concepts like hit points and dungeon exploration with the fluffiest of kid gloves. It's a game that was built to appeal to the opposite extreme of the RPG fandom – when compared to this book, Fight, Magic, Items, which was written for an audience of hardcore, RPG-addicted superfans of the genre.

. . . Or anyone who aspires to level up to such an elevated position of RPG appreciation!

Author Aidan Moher's reference to my Mystic Quest review is simply the tiniest sliver of this meaty tome, which covers the entire evolution of role-playing as a genre, beginning with its earliest origins in the tabletop games of several decades ago and tracing the timeline right on through to the modern era. The history of Japanese RPGs actually began in the West, with the rise of Dungeons & Dragons, and Moher rightly starts this story there in Chapter 1 before turning his attention to the first Dragon Quest and Final Fantasy and carrying on chronologically after that.

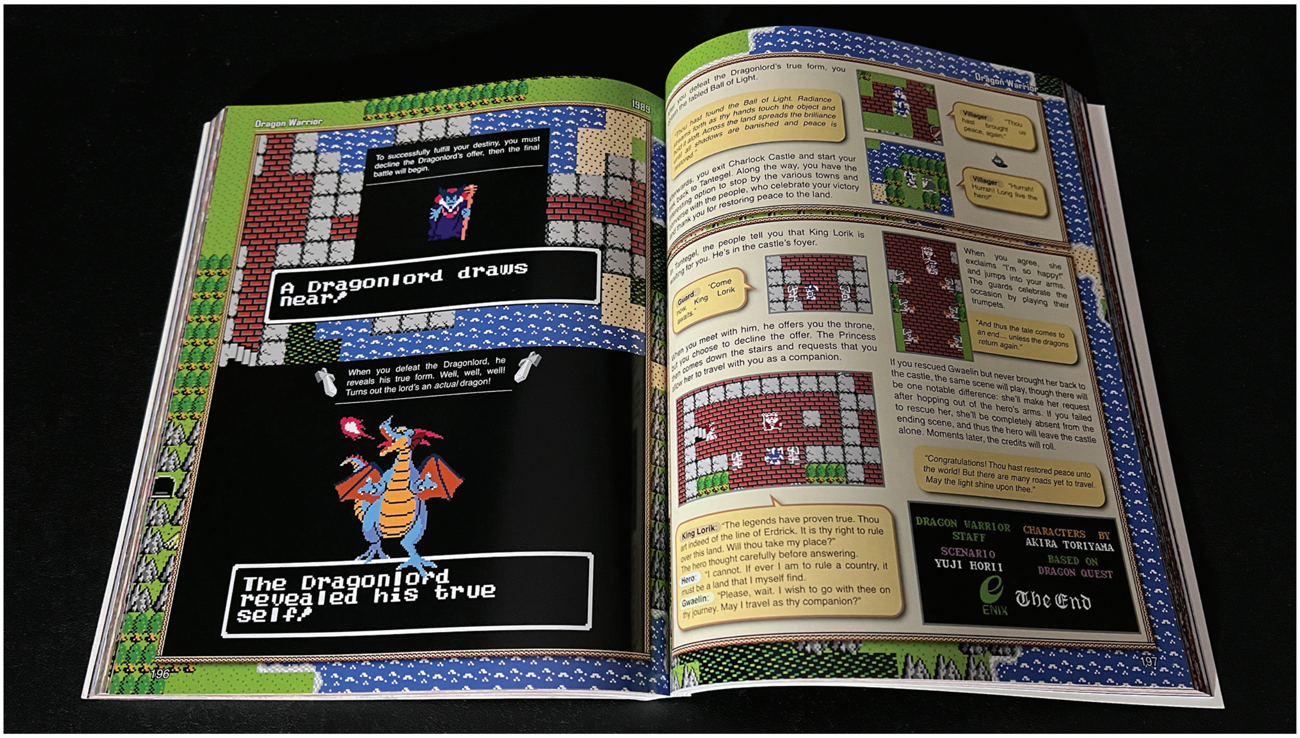
Well, *mostly* chronologically. Fight, Magic, Items has some curious page layout choices, as info boxes containing basic descriptions of RPGs from all eras are just scattered here and there through the book at random. Octopath Traveler, from 2018, pops up in the chapter that's otherwise dedicated to 1994's Final Fantasy VI. 1995's Seiken Densetsu 3 (a.k.a. Trials of Mana) gets mentioned, but not until after the chapter about Operation Rainfall, the 2011 fan campaign that pushed for Nintendo of America to release Xenoblade Chronicles in the States.

This book is also pure text – don't expect any imagery of the games discussed, as there is none. And it's sometimes a bit too quote-heavy: Some of the chapters quoted Jeremy Parish so frequently that I started to think Jeremy should have just been the author instead! All together, though, I think Fight, Magic, Items does accomplish its goal of offering readers a general overview of 40+ years of RPG history. An intimidating quest to take on! But Aidan manages to emerge victorious.

(Reading this book is certainly more recommended than playing Mystic Quest.) **— LUCAS**

8.0

FightMagicItems.rocks



BOOK REVIEW

SKIPPING AHEAD TO THE END CREDITS

Fast-forward to the finish line of 8-bit classics in NES Endings Compendium, Volume 1: 1985 - 1989.

SPOILER WARNING FOR the first Dragon Quest, I guess: It ends with a battle against the sinister Dragonlord, who, shockingly, can turn himself into a dragon!

That's only if you choose to fight him, of course. You could always opt for the alternative: deciding to join him in conquering the world. (After which he immediately betrays and kills you. Bad Ending!)

Now, if that was news to you, and if you're now intrigued instead of offended that I've brazenly shared endgame spoilers for a game released all the way back in the '80s, then do I have another book recommendation for you! NES Endings Compendium, Volume 1 was recently released as a new entry in the "Press Run" line of books put out by Limited Run Games, and it covers the final battles, ending sequences and closing credits of every different NES game that was released through the end of that same decade.

Volume 2, in the future, will pick things up from there and cover all the games from 1990. But there's no reason to wait for this series to continue – I say go ahead and jump in right here on the ground floor, because this first volume is already great entirely on its own.

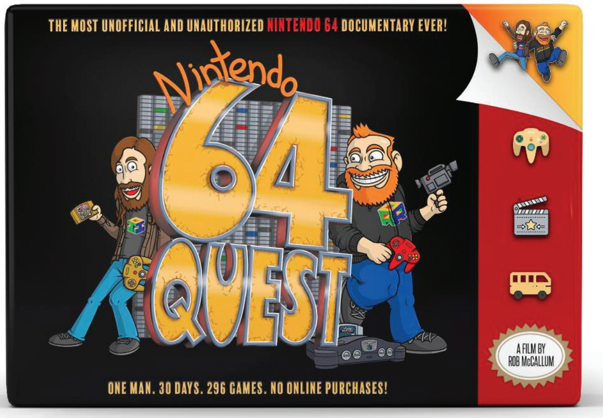
For someone who was actually alive and played many of these games back when they were brand-new (like me), flipping through this book is like looking back at an old school yearbook and remembering the faces of old friends. There are ending sequences chronicled here that I haven't seen in over 30 years! As well as hundreds, of course, that I never saw back then – either because I never did play the games attached to them, or because the games were too tough to beat (without a Game Genie), so I never saw their endings to begin with.

Author Rey Esteban has been chronicling video game endings for VGMuseum.com for nearly as long as the Internet has been availble to the public, and that site still has lots of these same screenshots available to view for free. But for the book, Rey takes those captured moments and fills in the full story around them, explaining the context of each game – and even going into deep detail on some titles that are his personal favorites. Every game's ending gets a rating on a 5-star scale, and the ones that really impress him get more time and attention: Ninja Gaiden, for example, has a huge spread of pages that walks through its entire story, and not just its final moments.

I disagree with some of Rey's assessments – like the ending of NES Tetris, which he scored as a 1.5 despite it clearly being amazing with its proto-Smash Bros. crossover of eight different Nintendo mascots at once – but the book really impressed me overall. It's got a great style of page design that calls back to the earliest days of Nintendo Power! And it's just clear that he poured a ton of effort into every entry. So give this book a look! **– LUCAS**

9.5

LimitedRunGames.com



DOCUMENTARY

Second Quest

Nintendo Quest is getting a sequel!

THEY'RE HITTING THE road again!

Back in 2015, a documentary film named Nintendo Quest was released to great acclaim from Big N fans around the world. It chronicled a physical game collecting challenge, as a pair of friends attempted to purchase the entire library of NES cartridges in less than a month – with the stipulation that online shopping was not allowed. So it turned into a road trip! The friends had to drive from town to town, visiting one game store after another, in their attempt to track down the nearly 700 different officially released NES titles and make in-person purchases to acquire them. (No spoilers on whether or not their quest was successful! You should check out the film to see for yourself. It's now available for free on YouTube.)

Several years have passed, but now director Rob McCallum and star Jay Bartlett are back. They're currently filming "Nintendo 64 Quest," a sequel with the same premise, but a different game library set in their sights: the complete N64 collection! The Nintendo 64 had far fewer games total than the NES did, so quantity-wise this quest should be simpler. But several N64 games are incredibly rare to come across, so they're sure to run into trouble tracking down some of them. Good luck, guys! **– LUCAS**

Facebook.com/NintendoQuestMovie

SPEEDRUNNING

Canine Gamer

Awesome Games Done Quick has gone to the dogs!

YOU'VE SEEN BLINDFOLDED speedruns. You've seen speedruns with two players sharing one controller. But have you ever seen a speedrun performed by a dog?

This past summer, a snazzy shiba inu named Peanut Butter became the world's first non-human speedrunner. Together with his owner, a streamer named JSR_, Peanut Butter completed a run of Nintendo's Gyromite in just 25 minutes and 29 seconds! What a good doggo!

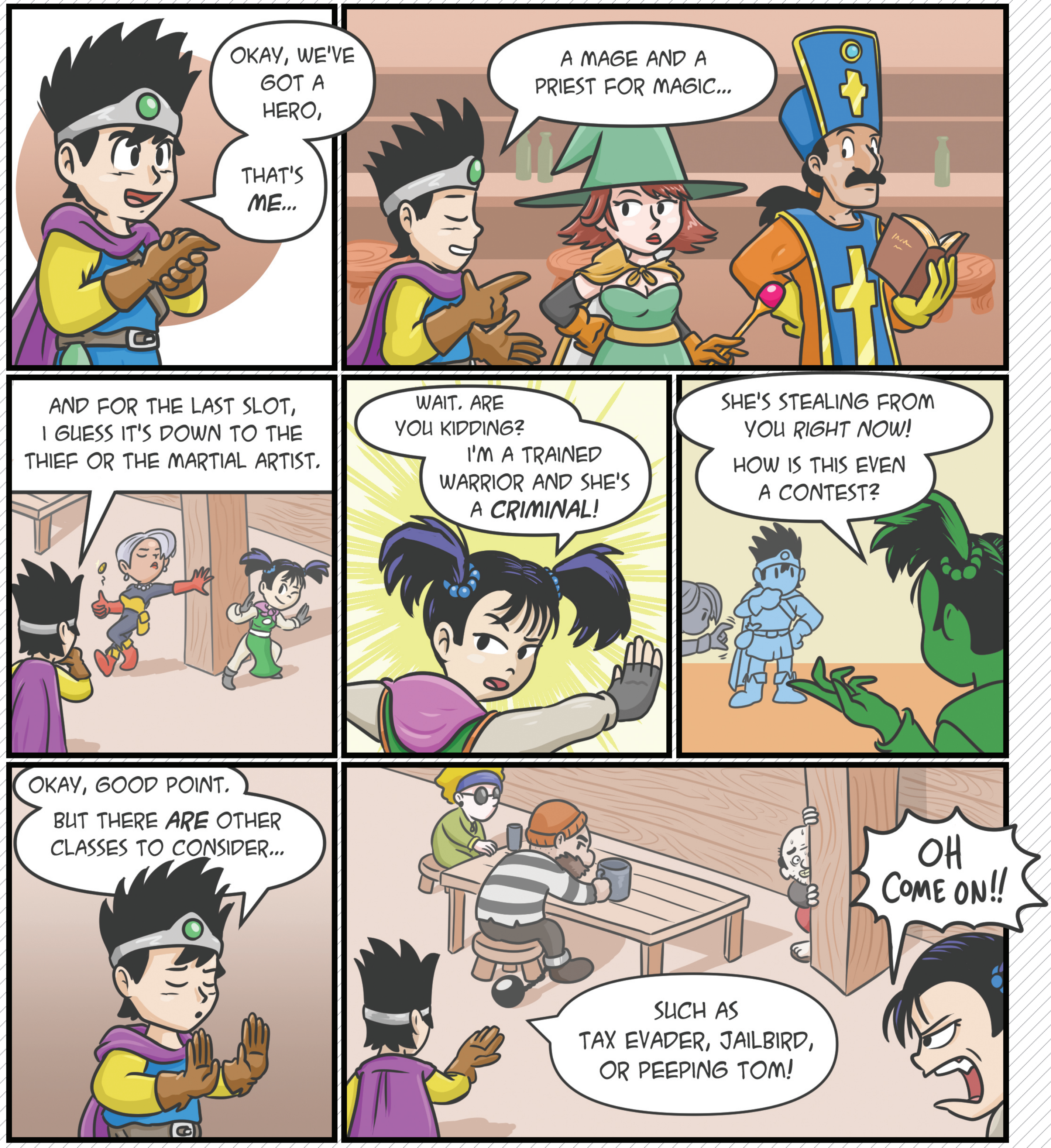
Gyromite was an NES launch title that was originally designed to be played using R.O.B., the Robotic Operating Buddy. His motorized actions would cause columns to move up and down on the screen, which allowed Professor Hector, the on-screen, sleepwalking character, to move through the openings and make steady progress toward the end of his adventure.

But now R.O.B. is out, and dog is in! Peanut Butter is taking up his role, using a special controller to press the buttons. JSR_ directs his actions with commands and treats, but all of the actual inputs are dog-entered!

If you want to see the spectacle yourself, their recorded run is available on YouTube. Or you could tune in to Awesome Games Done Quick coming up in January, as Peanut Butter will be doing it all again then! **– LUCAS**

GamesDoneQuick.com

"HERO" in... A Protagonist, A Mage, and a Priest Walk into a Bar



BY MATTHEW TARANTO

NEXT ISSUE

Another Code will get another chance to attract an audience, a long-running rivalry will be rekindled in **Mario vs. Donkey Kong**, the greenest ghostbuster will revisit some old haunts in **Luigi's Mansion 2 HD** and Paper Mario will flip the pages of his story back to its second chapter, **The Thousand-Year Door**, as Nintendo ushers in the eighth calendar year of the Nintendo Switch era with an absolute avalanche of remakes and reimaginings of great games from yesteryear. **Super Mario RPG** falls into that same category too, of course, and we'll have our full review of it ready to roll alongside fresh previews of all the rest, as remade games step into the spotlight for NF #69. It will also be the issue that kicks off the 12th year of Nintendo Force, so make sure you don't miss it! You wouldn't want to disappoint Ashley!

IN THE WORKS FOR ISSUE #69:

ANOTHER CODE: RECOLLECTION

MARIO VS. DONKEY KONG

CONTRA: OPERATION GALUGA

PAPER MARIO: THE THOUSAND-YEAR DOOR

SUPER MARIO RPG

SUPER MARIO BROS. WONDER

SONIC SUPERSTARS

LUIGI'S MANSION 2 HD

POKÉMON SCARLET & VIOLET: THE HIDDEN TREASURE OF AREA ZERO, PART 2: THE INDIGO DISK

WARIOWARE: MOVE IT!

SUPER BOMBERMAN R 2

DRAGON QUEST MONSTERS: THE DARK PRINCE

PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE LOST CROWN

AND MUCH MORE!

JANUARY/ FEBRUARY 2024

FROM RPGs TO TCGs

WE HAD A bit of Pokémon coverage here in this RPG-focused NF issue, and the mainline Pokémon games certainly do count as role-playing games — but they're kind of in their own self-contained space within the RPG world. After a player plays their first Pokémon game, they don't often follow that up by jumping over into their first Dragon Quest or Final Fantasy or even something like Super Mario RPG. No, they just keep their attention fixed on the Pokémon brand, and perhaps explore some other corners of its vast media empire.

Case in point: my own kids. Carter and Calvin have played several of the Pokémon sequels at this point, and even 5-year-old Cooper has started stepping in that world with his own save files on Violet and Shield. But none of the boys have branched out to any other role-playing experiences. Instead, they've spent some time with non-RPG Pokémon spin-offs, watched a ton of the Pokémon cartoon shows and, most recently, started in on the Pokémon card game.

It was a deliberate parenting decision on my part, so feel free to judge me if you like. But I thought this past summer would be a good time to get the older boys going on TCGs in general, and Pokémon was the natural place to start. (Magic: The Gathering was my game starting back when that game was brand-new in the early '90s. Maybe we'll get to that one eventually.) For now, though, Carter and Calvin have been delighted to learn the ins and outs of playing Trainer Cards and attaching Energy Cards and winning Prize Cards. They've been spending extra time with each other, testing out multiple decks against one another in battles that often extend beyond their bedtime! But I'll give them a pass on that, because I know they're busy building up a stronger brotherly bond.

Cooper and Colson are loving it too. But they're not playing so much as they are just collecting cards that they think look cool or that have high HP totals. No need to rush them along, of course: Playing TCGs can be an expensive hobby! **— LUCAS**

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